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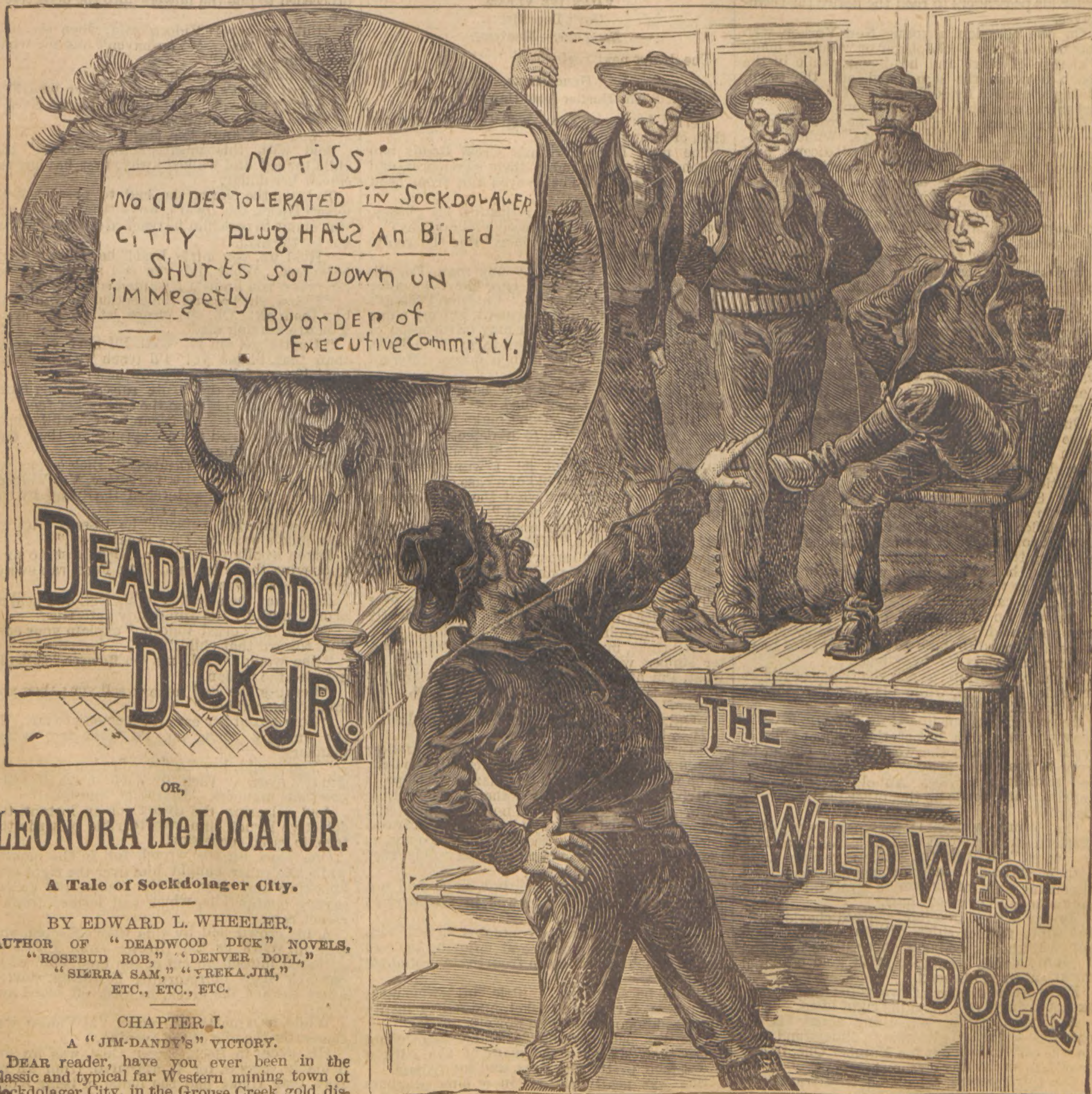
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OR, LEONORA the LOCATOR.

A Tale of Sockdolager City.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS,
"ROSEBUD ROB," "DENVER DOLL,"
"SIERRA SAM," "FREKA JIM,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A "JIM-DANDY'S" VICTORY.

DEAR reader, have you ever been in the classic and typical far Western mining town of Sockdolager City, in the Grouse Creek gold district of Nevada?

If not, I'd advise you not to go there provid-

"HELLO, WARP!" HE ROARED, POINTING HIS INDEX FINGER AT VIDOCCQ. "WILL YE HEV THIR CUMESCENSHUN TEN STEP DOWN HEER AN' TICKLE MY CHIN WITH A FEATHER?"

ing you are afflicted with a humor for wearing "plug" hats or "b'iled" shirts.

For as you approach the town, through a winding gulch, you are sure to encounter this sign, which should be sufficient warning to cause you to take the back trail without delay:

"NOTI S!!

"No dudes Tolerated in Sockdolager city. Plug hats an' b'iled shirts sot down on, immegetly.

"By order of

"EXECUTIVE COMMITTY."

This spoke for itself.

The men of Sockdolager, a thriving young camp were, with a few exceptions, hard-working veterans, with no pretensions to style or "fine fixin's," and from the day the camp was started, a joint resolution was unanimously passed, to keep the town free of dudes and manikins of fashion, and the wearing of plug hats or white shirts was one of the things not to be tolerated.

Accordingly the above notice was posted in a conspicuous place, where any one coming to the town must see it; and furthermore, old Hair-Lip Hank, who drove the "hearse" which plied between Sockdolager and adjacent points, made it a point when he was bringing any of the before-mentioned objectionable class of mortals into town, to slow up at the sign-board, and order his passengers to read the notice for themselves.

On one occasion a young New Yorker, who was bound to see Sockdolager or "bu'st," made a change of shirt and head-gear, while in the coach between the sign-board and the town, giving a miner a five-dollar note for a dirty old red shirt and a bullet-riddled slouch hat.

Of course, accordingly, when he reached town he was right in with the "boys," while a companion voyager, who wore a "dicer," and ignored the warning, had the mortification of seeing his glossy tile used as a football by a party of rollicking miners, and was told if he didn't divest himself of his immaculate "b'iled," instantler, he'd have to "shoot the town," which was meant, of course, that he would have to "get up and get" for other parts.

It is scarcely necessary to add that the man lost no time in donning the regulation garb.

Like the great majority of mining towns, Sockdolager City had its inevitable complement of toughs and tigers, gamblers and guzzlers, and its saloons, dance-houses, concert-halls, gaming-dens and other catchpenny affairs. It was a sort of Elysian field for fakirs and wit-workers, and, all in all, it could not be said that it was not a "pretty fly town."

One day, rather late in the afternoon, the stage rolled down into Sockdolager City, well laden with passengers, and drew up with a flourish before Sandy Bar Hotel, where debarkation took place.

The Sandy Bar was the most pretentious place in the town, and although a great barn-like edifice, it frequently had to turn guests away through lack of accommodations for the incoming tide of population.

Among the motley crowd who got off and out of the stage were several to whom our attention is specially called.

One was an old gent of goodly proportions, with a fat, ruddy countenance, whose every appearance tended to indicate that he hailed from the rural districts of "way back."

His hair was white, as was the fringe of whiskers under his chin; while his eyes were shaded by a pair of gold-rimmed glasses.

He was rigged out in a plain, homespun suit, heavy boots, a high hat of the ancient Quaker type, while though the weather was warm, he wore a heavy old gray overcoat, that plainly had seen long service. An old sachel, and a gnarled cane made up the other particulars of his outfit.

The second noticeable personage was what Western men characterize as a "Jim-dandy," or "sport"—a graceful, athletic young man, with a shrewd, handsome countenance, keen discerning eyes of brown, a graceful curling mustache, and close-cut hair.

He was attired in a light-colored cheviot suit, and white flannel shirt with turn-back collar; patent-leather knee-boots incased his feet, and a jaunty slouch sombrero with gold cord and tassel, sat upon his head.

He wore no display of weapons; no jewelry, except a single ring upon his right hand.

A jaunty, reckless something about his appearance seemed to give one to understand that he was able to look out for Number One, in any crowd, or under any circumstances.

The third person calculated to attract more than ordinary attention, was a curio, so to speak.

He was a dwarf but little more than four feet,

in height, with short stumpy legs, an enormous chest and breadth of shoulders, with long muscular arms, that seemed greatly out of proportion with the rest of his physique, the fists being of prodigious size.

His visage was as dark and swarthy as an Italian's, with a bristling short beard, a large mouth, hooked nose and great owl-like eyes, that seemed to lessen his appearance of being a human being. In fact, what with his shabby attire and general appearance, he was a most repulsive-looking object to gaze upon, and sinister enough to alarm almost any timid person.

When the passengers left the stage they naturally bolted for the hotel, as if vying with each other to secure the best accommodations.

It so happened that the three persons we have described were the last to leave the stage, and consequently the last to get a chance to register.

The old gentleman from "way back," put down his autograph, in a straggling hand, viz.:

UNCLE SI SLOAT,

Perkins's Cross-Roads, Vt.

The "Jim-dandy" sport was next given the pen, and with an ease characteristic of a Westerner inscribed himself:

VALENTINE VIDOCQ,

Gov't Detective.

Residence:—Nowhere!

The dwarf next registered:

HERO HICKS,

The Hustler from Hawkeye.

Verily, here were three registrations of more than ordinary novelty.

The man from Perkins's Cross Roads had watched the others indite their signatures, and turned to Vidocq, and surveyed him from head to foot, inquiringly.

"Waal!" he observed, adjusting his glasses, "so you're one o' them detective fellers, hey?"

"I believe I have that honor," was the reply, as the sport lit a cigar.

"Ye don't say! Waal, young man, I'm all-fired glad to see ye;" and here the Vermonter thrust out his horny hand. "I'm from Perkins's Cross Roads, 'way up in Vermont, an' my name is old Si Sloat. S'pect you may have heard of me, fer besides runnin' the best farm in the State, I've sot on grand jury nigh a dozen different times."

"I don't think I have ever had the honor of knowing you," Vidocq replied.

"Waal, mebbe not. Don't make much difference, anyhow. Ef you're a detective, you're jest my Hubbard squash, right from the word go, an' don't ye fergit it! I want jest sech a chap as you to take hold of a case of mine, an' I don't care a pickayune what the taxes aire as long as ye do the job up right."

"Very well, sir; I can undoubtedly place myself at your service," Vidocq assured, "but if your case is of any importance, you had better not discuss it in a public place like this, you know!"

This was said with a suspicious glance over his shoulder toward Hero Hicks, who evidently had been listening to what they had said.

"All right, my friend," Sloat declared. "Arter supper we'll talk matters over. Tell ye what, I'm as blamed hungry as a hoss without fodder. S'pose I'll find you around here, after supper?"

"Oh! yes, I shall be about," Vidocq replied.

Then they separated.

"I wonder what sort of a case the old fellow wants me to undertake?" the detective mused, as he wandered out upon the piazza. "Hope it will be something worth bothering one's time with. So far, I have seen no one I knew, and the chances are that my identity as Deadwood Dick, Jr., will not be discovered. I hope not, at any rate. I've won enough notoriety under that title, to last me for awhile."

The supper-bell soen rung, but, as he had not finished his cigar, Vidocq was in no hurry to visit the dining-room.

With several others, he contented himself with sitting upon the piazza, and enjoying the cool breeze which floated down from the pine-studded mountains.

While he sat there, a little child came upon the piazza, carrying a basket, and selling tastily arranged bouquets of wild flowers.

She was petite of figure, and evidently not more than six or seven years of age, with a sweet face, pretty blue eyes, and sunny hair.

She was neatly attired in a pink gingham dress, with white apron, and a jaunty little sun-hat upon her head, and was certainly a very little fairy, in appearance.

"Buy my flowers, sir? Buy a bouquet, sir?"

Plaintive and sweet was the voice of the child, as she mingled among those who were assembled on the piazza—men of several different nationalities, and varied types of character.

The miners, as a rule, took kindly to her, and the detective was so much pleased with her appearance that he motioned her to approach.

"How much do you ask for your flowers, little one?" he asked, in a kindly tone.

"Five cents a bunch, please, sir; three bunches for ten."

"Indeed? They are cheap, and pretty, like yourself. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. Tell me what your name is, and I'll buy ten bouquets and give you ten cents a bunch for each."

The child's eyes fairly blazed at this magnanimous offer, but she shook her head, and said:

"I can't do it, sir. I have only ten left, and that man yonder wants one."

And she pointed to Hicks, the dwarf, who was seated near by and motioning to her.

"Oh, don't mind him!" Vidocq said. "Give me the flowers, and here is your dollar, and I'll buy some flowers from you every day."

The sight of the bright new silver dollar had the effect of changing the child's mind, for she proceeded to pile the flowers into the detective's lap.

"But, see here!" Vidocq said, when she had finished the task. "You haven't told me what your name is, yet."

"My name is Fern, sir."

"Fern? That's an odd name. Fern what?"

"I don't know, sir. Mamma calls me Fern."

"Who is your mamma?"

"You don't know her, sir."

And with this unsatisfactory answer, the child turned and walked away, first having received her dollar.

To leave the piazza she had to pass close to where Hicks, the dwarf, was sitting, and as she was about to pass him he reached out and caught her by the arm.

"Hold up, you little brat!" he cried; "don't be so fast. What did you sell all them posies fer, when you know'd I wanted some of 'em?"

"Please, sir, because the gentleman wanted to buy them all! Oh, sir, please let go my arm! You are hurting me!"

"Hurting ye, am I? Well, I'll hurt ye worse than that, blame ye! I'll teach ye some manners, if your folks don't know how!"

And with this, the brute raised his big hand and slapped the child on the side of her face.

Of course little Fern began to cry, while those who had witnessed the act sprung to their feet with cries of indignation.

One leap brought Deadwood Dick (or, as we shall know him in this narrative, Val Vidocq) to the rescue, and he clutched the dwarf by the throat with a vise-like grip.

"You infernal ruffian!" he hissed; "let go that child's wrist, or I'll strangle you!"

Taken wholly by surprise, Hicks lost no time in obeying the order, and little Fern ran away, crying as she went.

Hicks was then jerked to his feet, and held at arm's length by the Jim-dandy detective.

"Now, sir," cried Vidocq, "explain your conduct toward that child!"

"She wouldn't sell me no flowers," sullenly growled the ruffian.

"Because she had none to sell you; then you up and slapped her!"

"Only boxed her ears for her sass to me. Ef she war my young 'un, I'd teach her better manners!"

"You would, hey?" a fierce fire burning in the dandy's eyes. "Then, by Jerusalem! I'll learn you some manners. Take that, and that!"

And releasing the dwarf for an instant, the detective struck him two terrible blows in the face, in rapid succession.

One blow hit the wretch full in the mouth, while the other caught him over the right eye, knocking him clear off the piazza, into an unsavory mud-puddle, which had formed from a recent rain.

A big crowd had by this time collected, and sent up roars as the Hustler from Hawkeye gathered himself up out of the mud, and, without any show of returning hostilities, started away toward the creek, to wash off blood and dirt.

While, as a matter of course, Val Vidocq was thereafter the lion of the evening.

His debut in Sockdolager City, was an undeniable success, for it appeared, from all report, that Hicks had the name of being a desperado who had created a reign of terror in adjacent mining-camps, until the Vigilantes had driven him out.

CHAPTER II.

A STORY TOLD BY MOONLIGHT.

It was full two hours after supper, ere Uncle Si Sloat made his appearance upon the piazza of the Sandy Bar Hotel, and joined Val Vidocq.

The old gent had divested himself of his heavy overcoat, and now wore a long, cool duster.

It was a pleasant evening, with plenty of light furnished by the soaring moon, and a balmy breeze sweeping down from the mountain. Both the piazza and hotel were crowded, while the street literally swarmed with people.

"Great town, this!" Uncle Si observed, as he took a chew of tobacco.

"Yes, from all I can see it is a typical mountain mining-town," Vidocq replied. "Some-what like Perkins's Cross Roads, I presume?"

"Lord bless you, no!" and the old man chuckled at the idea. "Why, all thar is at the Cross Roads is four houses and a blacksmith shop, and one of ther houses is a barn. I b'lieve, tho', if crops aire good, that old Squire Perkins intends to build a new pig-pen next year, an' I heard 'fore I come away that the sewin' society were talkin' of buildin' a church, pervidin' they could get a preacher who would preach right cheap, an' take his pay out in farm produce an' fire-wood!"

"Have you been long in the West?" Vidocq ventured to inquire.

"Long? Waal, I guess not—not more'n a month, and it's mighty glad I'll be to git back hum ag in, fer this is the 'tarnalest outlandish country I ever did see. No, I've been huntin' fer suthin', 'thout a particle of success, and that's the reason et kind of tickled me when I found out you were a detective!"

"Sh!" Vidocq said quickly. "There are too many open ears around here, to admit of private conversation. Let's take a stroll where we will not be so likely to be overheard."

"Good idear! good idear!" the old man said, and accordingly they left the piazza and walked leisurely out into the heart of the gulch.

When Vidocq reached a point where he thought there was no danger, the two men sat down upon a rock, and while Old Si lit his pipe, the detective likewise ignited a cigar.

"Now, then, uncle," he said, "you can tell me with freedom what is your trouble, and then I can form an idea whether I can help you out or not."

"Waal, I hope ye kin," Si replied with a sigh. "Et ain't a very pleasant story for me to tell, but I suppose you might as well hear it."

"Waal, it aire just fifty year, now, that I and Betsy, my wife, hev lived thar on the old farm, at the Cross Roads—lived thar in our quiet, humble, but comfortable way, with never a cloud to mar the happiness of our lives until eight year ago."

"Just about twenty-four year ago, our first and only child war born, as we thought to bless and comfort us in our declining years."

"She was dearer than life itself, to us, and as she grew up toward womanhood, she was voted the prettiest girl in our section of the State, and greatly sought after. Many a honest country lad would have laid his life at her feet, literally, fur her sake, but she had different notions. Beauty, sir, is a woman's great curse!"

Here Uncle Si paused to wipe a tear from his eye.

"I don't know but you are right," Vidocq said thoughtfully. "Beauty often does wreck a woman's life."

"Yas, I know et only too well. Waal, we give our Stella the best eddication that could be had at an ordinary school, and she allus carried off the honors at the head o' her class. But, even this didn't kiver her ambition. She wanted to learn music."

"She had a good voice, an' knew a right smart lot o' tunes but didn't have no instrument, 'cept my old fiddle. Betsy an' I were fond of music, an' I were gittin' to be purty well-to-do, an' so when our girl hinted at a peaner, I went straight to Boston and bought her one, an' I tell ye it made the other girls envy our Stella amazin'ly."

"The next thing wanted was a music-teacher. Thar wasn't any 'round our parts, but, jest at this time, Squire Perkins took a summer boarder, who said he was a professor of music from New York. Dunno whether he was or not, but he could play an' sing, and did teach our Stella a power about music, an' no mistake."

"Well, things went along through the summer, till it come Stella's birthday. Then, one mornin' we woke up to find our girl gone, and also the professor. He called himself Professor Reginald de Brown."

"No trace was left behind to tell whither they

had gone, and I tell you, that for a time, it broke me and the old woman all up. Finally a letter came from New York, from our Stella. It told us she had come to the great city, with the professor, to finish her eddication in music, and that De Brown was defrayin' all her expenses, and when she was eddicated, and introduced into society, she would be a great lady."

"Jest fancy our Stella bein' a great lady, with low-neck dresses, short sleeves, an' sech frivolous things! I tell you, sir, it fairly made my an' Betsy's blood cold."

"Waal, Stella told us, also, that she had discovered that her benefactor—that's jest what she called him—was very rich, instead of being a poor music-teacher, an' she said that they were engaged to be married, and would be home to see us Thanksgiving, on their wedding tower."

"I didn't wait for no wedding tower, you can bet. I first went to the stable, harnessed up the fastest mare, drove to the nearest railroad station, and set out for New York. When I got there I tried to find De Brown, but 'twas no use. It was worse than lookin' for a needle in a haystack. No one knew De Brown, an' how should they in sech a mighty big city? It's an all-fired wonder I didn't git lost, myself."

"Finally, I put the matter into the hands of the chief of police, and paid him the price of a year's crops, at the Cross Roads, to find our girl. But, even this did no good, and at last I returned home, a heart-broken man."

"Thanksgivin' come and went, year by year, but our child never returned to the parental roof. So finally, the old woman and I gave our child up for lost, and have mourned her as dead, ever since, until lately!"

"Ah! then, you recently learned something to gather hope from?" Vidocq inquired, having become considerably interested in the old man's recital.

"Waal, yes, I'm kinder in hopes so, or else you wouldn't ever catch me out in this dog-goned country!" Uncle Si replied.

"You see, it's this way. Less than three months ago, Squire Perkins's daughter, Keziah, got a letter, an' on openin' it, she found that it was from our Stella. There wasn't no legible post-marks on it, so we could see where it cum from, but on the back of it, in blue letters, was writ with pencil, 'Sockdolager City Mail.' That sot me to thinkin' an' rememberin' that at some small places where they hev no datin' stamps, they write the startin' point on wi' pencil, I concluded that Sockdolager City was where that letter started from!"

"You were doubtless right. But, did not the letter, itself, give a clew to the startin' point?"

"Nary clew. It jest begun, 'Dear Friend,' and ended up wi' our Stella's signature. Well, I did not know where Sockdolager City was, from Adam, but I remembered of what outlandish names they give some o' the Western places, an' so made up my mind that Sockdolager must be West."

"So I fixed Betsy up as comfortable as I could, an' told her when I cum back I would either bring our daughter dead or alive. Well, I cum West, and traveled and traveled, and searched and searched without findin' any trace of this town, until about two weeks ago, I run across a miner who told me where to find it, and how to reach it. And at last, here I am, what's left of me, after joltin' around in yer consarned stages!"

And here the old man paused to rub the perspiration from his brow, with his big bandanna handkerchief.

"Mr. Sloat, yours has indeed been a novel experience," Vidocq observed, "but I live in hopes that all will yet come out right. But, you haven't told me the contents of your daughter's letter."

"No, that's so. Waal, I guess you better read that for yerself, 'ca'se it makes me feel kind of squeamish like when I try to read it."

He drew a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket, and gave it to Vidocq, who by the aid of the bright moonlight, managed to decipher the following:

"DEAR FRIEND:—After many years—it seems an age to me—I will try and write you a few lines, to let you know that I am still living—but oh! so miserable and unhappy!"

"When I ran away from my dear old home with De Brown, seven years ago, I imagined I had a future of greatest happiness before me. But, alas, when too late, I found what a grievous mistake I had made in forsaking my dear old mother and father for one of the worst scoundrels on earth."

"I came to New York with him, and learned that he was rich. He gave me a good musical education, and finally we wer married. All went well for awhile, and we traveled extensively. But our honey-

moon was but little more than over when he became cross and neglectful, and made me very unhappy. I clung to him, however, faithfully, and tried to win back his love, but it was no use. He finally left me far, far from my dear old home, alone among strangers, and with my few months' old b. b. t. care for. I have never heard from him since, and that was over five years ago."

"What I have suffered since then no one can ever know but my God, who watched over my destiny. At times I have been sick, near unto death; at times starvation has stared me in the face, and many other troubles have besieged me, until—"

"Well, until but for one thing, I would willingly welcome death at any moment. What I refer to is my child—my dear little girl, who is now the only comfort I have in life except remembrance of my good old parents whom I left at Perkins's Cross Roads."

"My child is a little over five now, very beautiful and bright, and for her sake I must live on in this bitter life."

"I have never dared write home, for knowing what good Christian people my parents were, with their strict Puritanical ideas, I feared they would cast my letter into the fire, without even reading it."

"So, after all the disgrace and affliction I have put upon their dear old heads, I cannot ever see them again in this world. Pe haps in the new life we may know each other, and all will be forgiven."

"Good-by, dear friend. I simply write this to let you know I am living, but that, oh! my life is a living death! Good-by. Please try to cheer them up, for my sake."

STELLA."

Val Vidocq silently folded the paper, with a very grave expression of countenance.

A glance at Si showed him that the old man's face was buried in his hands.

Everything was strangely quiet where they sat.

And the moon shed down its mellow light, as if with compassion upon the head of the sorrowing father.

CHAPTER III.

ALL ON ACCOUNT OF A HAT.

Vidocq and Uncle Si held a protracted consultation for a while, and then, as the hour was growing late, they arose and returned toward the hotel, Vidocq having promised to do all in his power to find the old Vermonter's daughter.

If she was in Sockdolager, he would probably have no difficulty in finding her, even though she might be living under an assumed name.

When they got back to the vicinity of the hotel, they found a large and quite demonstrative crowd collected in front of it.

"I wonder what's the matter now?" Vidocq mused. "Something must have gone wrong. In fact, I seldom strike a town where there is not some sort of a jamboree sets in, immediately after my arrival."

By dint of considerable dodging about, he and Uncle Si succeeded in reaching the hotel piazza; but, no sooner had they done so, than a yell went up from the crowd in the street.

"That's him! Thar he is! He's our mutton!" was the cry of a score of hoarse voices, while several burly miners sprung up the steps.

Vidocq coolly turned and faced them, a pair of revolvers suddenly appearing in his grasp.

"Well, gentlemen, what do you want?" he demanded.

"Not you! not you!" cried the leader of the party. "It's the old man we're after!"

"Oh! are you? Well, sir, I represent the old gentleman on this particular occasion and am able to take care of his business. What can we do for you?"

"The hat! the dicer! that's what we want, and we aire goin' to have it, too!" was the cry.

Vidocq then remembered having seen the strange sign, up the gulch, while en route for the camp, and was now well able to fathom the meaning of the gathering.

"Well, gents!" he retorted composedly, "I am sorry to inform you that you can't have that hat!"

"Oh! we can't, hey?"

"No, you can't!"

"An' who's goin' to hinder us, me fine bucks?"

"I am!" Vidocq replied, with the same steady nerve always so characteristic of him, "and I'm just the double-distilled dancin' dervish from Dark Diggin's what can do it, too. The first galoot who dares to come up here and offer to molest my pardner's head-gear, dies with his boots on, without further comment!"

The self-styled Executive Committee of Sockdolager City, listened, heard, stared, but failed to comprehend.

What did it mean?

Who was this bold individual, who dared attempt to bluff them out of their citizen's rights, at the revolver's point?

Who was the calmly-spoken but sternly-meaning galoot, who presumed thus boldly to face them, and tell them what they should not do, when they stood twenty to his lone one, and could get reinforcements, if need be?

Elephant Eph, the leader of the gang, and the biggest man in the camp, took time to take a chew of tobacco, and give his breeches an upward hitch, and then began to argue the point.

"Now, look here, young feller!" he expostulated, "you're mighty fresh, I see, an' we don't want to hurt you, bein's ye'r a stranger in camp—"

"I don't intend you shall!" Vidocq quickly put in.

"Ye don't, hey? Waal, that shows you're as green as ther veriest tenderfoot, even ef you do carry a couple of pops. An' it's plain to see ye don't know who we are!"

"Nor do I care a continental red who you are!" retorted the Jim-dandy, complacently. "I do know, however, that if you attempt to disturb the harmless old gentleman in my rear, the undertaker will have a rush of business on hand, to-morrow, and there will be a rise in funeral stock!"

"Bah! we're twenty to your one, young feller!"

"Can't help it; if you were a hundred, it wouldn't scare me!"

"But, you don't understand! We hain't got no grudge against the old duffer. All we want is his plug hat an' b'iled shirt. We are the Executive Committee and guardians of the peace of this camp, and it is one of our ordinances that no plug hats or b'iled shirts be allowed, and it is a law we rigidly enforce, without regard to persons or station. So if your friend will hand over his plug an' his b'iled shirt, there'll be no trouble at all!"

"My friend will do nothing of the sort!" Vidocq announced, sternly, "and, as I stated before, the first man who comes upon this platform to raise a disturbance, dies with his boots on, and these little self-cocking Gatling guns of mine are before you as proof of my assertion. They're good for twelve of you, and I reckon there are a few gents in my rear, who will see me out!"

"You bet!" came the concerted shout from different parts of the piazza.

"So, Messrs. Executive Committee, if the circus is about to begin, let the band strike up a funeral dirge, and set your Colts' at liberty!" added Vidocq.

For the first time since the confab had begun, had begun, Elephant Eph swore roundly, and turning, he descended the steps and entered into conversation with his pals, in a low tone.

Evidently he realized that he was, for once in his life, outgeneraled, for, after a short consultation, he again faced the piazza.

"Waal, young feller!" he said, gruffly, "I reckon we don't want anything to do with any part of you, to-night. But, look out for us! We ain't ther boyees to let the matter drop here, you bet! We've got it in for you, and if we don't make you sweat, before you get out of this camp, you can call me a liar!"

"All right! Call around and see me, when you have time!" laughingly retorted Vidocq. "Perhaps I may then be able to recommend some idea by which you can start the perspiration on me."

Elephant Eph made no reply, except by uttering an expressive objurgation, and turning, stalked away, followed by his comrades.

Seeing that trouble was over for the present, Vidocq put away his weapons, and immediately found himself surrounded by a number of persons, including Uncle Si, who were eager to shake him by the hands.

Early next morning Vidocq was out of bed, and after making his toilet, he left the hotel, and took a walk about the town.

He found it even a larger place than he had expected, and everywhere were signs of lively industry. Buildings, both for habitations and business purposes, were going up, rapidly, as well as cabins and tents, and shafts were being sunk, here and there.

The perpendicular sides of the gulch were also beginning to be honeycombed with "drifts," while an ore-crusher and stamp-mill had already been started in the bottom.

Among other things which caught Vidocq's inquiring eye was a new tent, of a size somewhat larger than those ordinarily used for dwelling purposes.

There was nothing peculiar about the tent, in itself; but in front, fastened between two upright poles, was a large, fancifully-lettered banner, containing the following announcement:

MLLE. LEONORA!

PHENOMENAL SOMNAMBULISTIC WONDER AND MARVELOUS MIND-READER!

When walking in her sleep, locates mines, makes discoveries, etc. Recovers stolen or hidden article; foretells coming events, etc. Has already, when in a somnambulist state, located many valuable gold and silver mines.

Consultation, Ten Dollars.

MLLE. LEONORA IS THE WORLD'S GREATEST WONDER.

Vidocq paused to read this, an amused smile playing about his mouth, as he finished.

"Humph! I wonder what the next fake will be to catch a few dollars!"

He was about turning away when he felt something tugging at his arm, and looking around, found little Fern, the flower girl, standing beside him.

"Oh! mister! mister!" she cried, "come with me! Mamma wants to see you!"

"Indeed? And where is your mamma, little one?"

"Come with me, and I will show you!" was the reply, and she tugged away at his coat, until he felt constrained to accompany her.

Fern led the way around to a rear entrance to the tent, standing wherein was a woman, whom he at once concluded was Mademoiselle Leonora.

She was of medium height, and graceful figure, and was attired in black.

Her hands were small and white, but nothing of her face, barring the tip of her chin and her eyes could be seen; owing to the fact that a black cambric mask covered the rest of her features.

She bowed, slightly, as Fern led her hero up, crying:

"Here, mamma, this is the gentleman!"

"You will excuse me, sir, I trust," said "mamma," in a pleasant voice, "but Fernnie was telling me about your kindly coming to her rescue, and I want so much to thank you. If there was any law in this town, I'd have the ugly brute arrested. But alas, law is worse than a dead letter here, and no one can get justice except they are big and strong enough to fight for it."

"I reckon you are about right, ma'am!" Vidocq replied. "My little act, however, merits no thanks, as any one would have done the same as I did. I gave the cowardly wretch sufficient punishment, so that I reckon he will be careful how he conducts himself in the future!"

"I am glad you did, sir, but I shall be afraid to let Fern go out about the camp, in future!"

"Have no fears on that score, ma'am. I shall be about camp for some time to come, and I will see that no one molests her."

"You are very kind, sir, and you have my sincere gratitude!"

Then, after an interchange of a few more words, Vidocq politely raised his hat, and took his departure.

CHAPTER IV.

UNCLE SI MEETS A FRIEND.

In the mean time, during Vidocq's absence, Uncle Si Sloat was up early and stirring, and believing in the old saying that the early bird catches the worm, he was the first one down at the breakfast-table after the bell rung.

It was quite evident too, that old age had not seriously affected his appetite, for he put down as big a repast as any man in the room, after which he lit his pipe and went out upon the piazza.

He had only been seated a few minutes when he was approached by a man whose attire and general appearance betokened him to be a person of more than ordinary importance.

He was of large and commanding figure, and wore an immense sweeping beard of reddish hue, his hair being several shades darker, and his eyes darker still, and restless in their glance.

He was richly-dressed and wore diamonds.

"You will excuse me, my friend!" he said, drawing a chair near to Uncle Si, and sitting down, "but I wanted to inquire if you are the gentleman who is registered at this hotel as Mr. Sloat, of Vermont?"

"Reckon not," was the reply of the old farmer, without even taking the pipe from his mouth. "I sign myself Uncle Si Sloat, and can't have no mister harnessed onto my name."

"Ah! I see. Good joke. I thought I could not have been mistaken. And so you're really Uncle Si Sloat from Perkins's Cross Roads, 'way up in old Vermont?"

"That's me, sir. Why?"

"Because it does me proud to see you. Why, it's like a ray of sunshine from 'way out there. I dare say you don't recognize me?"

"Reckon not. Never sot eyes on you before, as I knows on."

"Oh, yes you have! Of course you have! If you live at the Cross Roads you must know Squire Perkins?"

"Know him? Well, I should presume! Orter know him, when we had a two-year lawsuit over an apple tree that stood on the line between our farms, an' spent a thousand dollars apiece in the wrangle, an' then, to settle the matter, had to cut the tree down, split it in two, and each take half. Oh! yes, I know the squire right well. He's the meanest, stingiest man, for a professed Christian, thar is in Vermont. He's so mean that if he war goin' to sell a bushel o' wheat, he'd split a kernel in two, to make exact weight."

The man with the whiskers laughed heartily.

"Well, you ain't far out of the way," he assented. "The squire always was pretty close-fisted, for a man who preached 'cast thy bread upon the waters.' It was mighty little he cast. And, do you know, Uncle Si, I know just where that apple tree stood. By Jove! it makes my mouth water to think what luscious apples it used to have, about harvest time!"

Uncle Si turned square around in his chair, and gazed at the stranger in astonishment, through his eye-glasses.

"Say, looker here!" he ejaculated. "I ain't given to swearin' only 'bout once a year, but, who in thunderation are you, anyhow?"

The other laughed good-naturedly.

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you, and not keep you in suspense. Do you remember that quite a good many years ago, when your hair was not as white as now, Squire Perkins had his nephew bound out to him—a devil-may-care cub of a lad, named Charlie Covington, who was too lazy to work, and finally ran away, and was never heard from, afterward?"

"Do I remember?" ejaculated Si. "Waal, I hope I may never live to get back to the Cross Roads if I don't!"

"Well, I'm that cub—I'm Charles Covington, at your service."

"You Charlie Covington?"

"Bet your boots!"

"Well, of all things wonderful! You that spindle-shanked, dirty-faced young imp? Well, well, well! If Betsy war only here, now, to see you! Put her thar, boy!"

And the next minute the two men were shaking hands heartily.

"And you're Charley Covington! Why I'd as soon have expected to have met the Old Nick, himself. Oh! I ain't fergotten you. You're the young whelp who used to sneak over to my place, arter Betsy and I were a-bed, and steal our pears."

"Correct. I never wanted for pears in them days," Covington laughed. "But how's things at home, Uncle Si? How's Aunt Betsy?"

"Oh! she's comfortable. She's gettin' ruther old, but gets around purty chipper, for all that."

"And Stella? She was but a child then."

"Dead!" Uncle Si said, gravely.

"Ah! that's too bad," Covington said, sympathizingly. "But let's change the subject, for I see it affects you to speak of her. I suppose in all these years you must have put aside quite a good sum of money, for a rainy day, Uncle Si?"

"Yes, a tolerable purse. And how about you, Charles?"

"Oh! I can't complain. See that new house off yonder?"

"Yas."

"Well, that's mine, and besides that, I've got a lot of other interests here, and all over the Territory. I presume I could sign my check to a couple of millions!"

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Uncle Si. "You don't mean it, Charlie?"

"But I do, though!"

"Well, well! Who'd 'a' thought you'd 'a' growed up to be rich like that? I'd sooner expected to find you in State Prison."

"No doubt of that. But, layin' jokin' aside, we've sat here chinning long enough. Come along over and see my house, and we'll have a nip of some of the finest wine you ever saw."

"Sorry I can't oblige ye, Charlie, but I'm waitin' for a friend of mine, who is doing some business fer me, and I expect him at almost any minnit. He's got a funny name, but he's all wool and a yard wide, you can bet."

"What's his name?"

"Waal, it's spelt V-i-d-o-c-q; sort of a French name, I take it, tho' he ain't no more French than my old brindle cow, what kin jump a nine-rail fence."

"Vidocq, eh? I saw his name on the register. A detective, isn't he?"

"I kinder reckon he is!"

"But what in the world do you want with a detective, Uncle Si?"

"Oh, that's a private matter of my own. Here he comes now. I'll give you an introduction to him."

"Don't bother yourself," Covington said, rising. "I must be going. Call over and see me during the day, Si."

"Wal, p'raps I will," the old man replied.

After which Covington ran lightly down the steps of the piazza, just as Vidocq mounted them.

"Well, you're up early, Mr. Sloat!" the detective said, taking the seat Covington had just vacated.

"Oh, no; not unusually so. I allus was up in good season, if I wasn't sick. 'The early bird catches the worm,' you know."

"Dunno about that. I was up earlier than you, and I didn't even get the sight of a worm!" laughed Vidocq.

"Birds too thick—birds too thick," commented the old man, with a shrug. "I caught a s'prisin' worm, I did."

"Indeed! How's that?"

"You see that man who descended the steps as you came up?"

"Yes."

"Who do you suppose he is?"

"How should I know?"

"Well, that feller is Charlie Covington, who, twenty years ago, was Squire Perkins's bound boy, up at Perkins's Cross Roads in old Vermont. He run away from the squire's, an' that was the last that was ever heard from him; an' here he is in Sockdolager, the biggest man in the place, an' can now sign his check for two million dollars."

"Indeed! You're sure it is the same party you knew twenty years ago?"

"Sart'in I am. Why, didn't he remind me of old times, and tell me about the old harvest apple tree, and how he used to sneak over nights and steal my pears, after Betsy and I was in bed? On, it's Charlie, sure enough, and he's a mighty good feller. We'll go over to his house by-and-by, an' he's goin' to open a bottle of wine."

"Excuse me," Vidocq said. "I'll not be one of the party."

"Jupiter! Why not? Charlie's a good fellow."

"A very good reason why I should not constitute one of the party," Vidocq replied. "Good fellows are able to take care of themselves. It's a part of my business to look out for the bad fellows."

"Ha, ha! Cute idea, that! Well, if you won't go, so be it. You'd be welcome."

"Oh, no doubt. By the way, Mr. Sloat, there's something I wish to speak about. You, no doubt, have quite a sum of money about you. Now, you're a stranger here, and there's lots of desperadoes laying around camps—laying for such as you. Wouldn't it be better for you to leave the better part of your money in the hotel safe?"

"By George, you're right! I hadn't thought of that. Yes, it would—but, no; not in the safe. I'd trust you a blamed sight quicker than I would the hotel. Here's my pocketbook. Take it, and take keer of it. I ain't afeard of no one's getting it away from you. I've got some loose change besides."

And he gave Vidocq a leather-strapped pocketbook, that seemed ready to burst from what it contained.

"Very well. I'll see it is kept safe," the detective said, for he was, in truth, secretly afraid that the old man might be glibly enough to be taken in by sharpers, and so be fleeced out of all the money he possessed.

CHAPTER V.

WAS IT STELLA?

THE proprietor of the Sandy Bar Hotel was a genial dispositioned man, named Mose Hines. That at some previous period of his life he had been a sporting man was made evident by the lively interest he took in sporting matters, in general.

He had seen Val Vidocq's easy victory over Hero Hicks, and later on, had witnessed the rebuff of the so-called "Executive Committee," and had been one of the first to grasp the detective by the hand, and congratulate him on his victories.

So, during the forenoon, on seeing Vidocq sitting alone on the piazza—Uncle Si having gone off to call upon Charles Covington, the rotund landlord brought out his easy-chair, and took a seat beside the younger man.

"Well, Mr. Vidocq, how do you find yourself,

to-day?" he asked. "I thought you were looking lonely, and a chat would liven you up."

"Quite right. Glad to have some one to talk with," Vidocq replied. "You have quite a town, I see?"

"Yes, and she's booming every day. The man I bought out is sorry he sold, now."

"You have not been here long, then?"

"About three weeks."

"Are you pretty well posted about the people?"

"Well, fairly. I trot around a good deal, and manage to get pretty well acquainted."

"What sort of a man is Charles Covington?"

"Covington? Oh! yes. He's our local nabob. I don't know much about him or his antecedents, for he was here, before I came. He seems like a pretty fair sort of fellow, however, and I'm told he's well heeled!"

"Do you know any one in this camp by the name of De Brown?"

"De Brown? No, I am not aware that I ever heard the name before."

"Do you know of a lady by the name of Miss Sloat, living here?"

"No. I know pretty near all the female population by sight and name, but no one named Miss Sloat."

"If it is not taxing your patience too much, who and what is Mademoiselle Leonora?"

Hines laughed outright.

"Well, you've got me, now!" he declared. "She's an enigma none of us can solve."

"A fraud, eh?"

"Not much! She does what she advertises."

"Nonsense! Do you mean to tell me she can locate a mine in her sleep?"

"Yes! You see that shaft-house over yonder? That mine belongs to a tenderfoot we call 'Handsome.' She located that. They hadn't gone fifteen feet before they struck pay rock!"

"Incredible! Why, it is simply preposterous!"

"It may seem so, but it's a fact!"

"But, how does she do it?"

"Well, I tell you what I know, from the way Handsome gives it. When Handsome struck the town he had some hoodle, and wanted to speculate. Mind you, what I tell you must go no further, as she bound Handsome to take but one trusty person into his confidence!"

"Oh! you needn't fear about me!"

"I know it. I merely wanted to caution in time, for there's lots, who won't pay a cent to find out anything, are eager to find out her way of conducting business."

"Well, as I said before, when Handsome came here he had some money to invest. He stopped with me, and we soon became friends. Handsome rather believed in spiritualism, mind-reading, and such things, and he says to me, one day:

"'I'm going to try the Mam'selle.' So he gave her a call, and paid her ten dollars as consultation fee. The first thing she then asked him, if he believed in spiritualism. He took the cue and said yes. She then told him she was pretty certain she could locate him a mine inside of twenty-four hours. He was to pay her five hundred dollars down, spot cash, and was to call the next morning, when she would give him a map, showing him where to sink a shaft. Then, he could quietly buy up the claim, nominally as a venture, and set to work."

"Well, Handsome paid over the money, and then came and told me what he had done. I told him to his face he was a fool; but, to make a long story short, we arranged to secretly watch the movements, that night, and determine if possible where the claim was to be located."

"Well, we watched, and a circus we had of it, too. It was not until after three o'clock in the morning, when we saw her leave the tent and wander out into the gulch. She was clad in black, and her hair fell down to her waist. Once we got near enough to her to see that her eyes were closed."

"Well, she led us a chase all over the gulch, never stopping once, or making any sign of selecting any particular spot. Her left hand was pressed against her bosom, her right hung loosely by her side, and clutched a forked twig. After waltzing around the gulch for upwards of an hour, she retired to her tent, and we went to bed."

"The next day Handsome got his map, secured his claim, and set men to work. Within five days they struck a paying vein of gold that promises to develop into a daisy!"

"Well, this beats my time!" Vidocq ejaculated. "Is this the only mine she has located?"

"No. She's located one for Sim Johnson and one for Nick Carrol, and I hear there's others

going to employ her. But, here's a good joke about Charley Covington. He went to her to get her to locate a mine for him. She asked him if he believed in spirits, and he said only in those that came out of the neck of a bug-juice bottle. That settled it for him. She told him she could do nothing for him, and, in spite of his expostulation and large offers of money, she would do nothing for him. To-morrow night, weather permitting, she has promised to give an exhibition of her mind-reading powers in public."

"Does she wear the mask all the time?"

"So far as any one knows, and she dares any one to try to remove it from her face. No one attempts it, for she goes well armed, is a dead-shot, and it would be a pretty risky job to tackle her. Another thing: she is seldom seen outside her tent."

"Little Fern, the flower-girl, is her daughter, eh?"

"I suppose so. Leastwise, she calls her mam-ma!"

The landlord was called indoors at this juncture, and Vidocq was left to himself.

"Rather queer about this Leonora," he mused.

"There must be a mystery connected with her life, but whether or no it would pay to run it out is a question. She is undoubtedly a woman of most extraordinary attainments, if she really does what is told of her, and that she is here for the purpose of making money, goes without a question. But for these facts, I should be inclined to suspect—but, pshaw! that's all nonsense, too. Heigh-ho! I don't see that I am progressing very fast on Sloat's case. I don't know where to begin!"

Nor did he. He had no foundation, so far, to begin work on, except the very uncertain clew furnished by Stella's letter to the Perkins girl. So he lounged the day out, about the hotel, and made no effort to do anything.

Night came on, but no Uncle Si came with it.

"I'll wager a good deal the old man and his friend Covington have got gloriously drunk," was his quiet comment. "I rather disliked to see the old man go over there, though, if asked, it would puzzle me to tell exactly why. Not that I know anything derogatory to this Covington's character, but—well, I suppose it's none of my business. This world is full of sharpers, and I'm glad Uncle Hayseed left his funds with me."

Nine o'clock came, and ten, and it was nearly eleven, when four men came upon the piazza, bearing a human form between them.

Vidocq at once perceived it was the Vermont-er's body, and sprung from his chair excitedly.

"Hello, here!" he cried. "What's the matter with the old man?"

"Oh! nothin' but a faint!" one of the men replied, as they deposited the body on the floor.

"Do you know him?"

"Yes. Where did he faint?"

"Down here to Joe Reeve's concert hall. He went in to see the show, and seemed to like it first-strait, till one of the gals come out and began to sing a ballad; then she and the old man seemed to see each other at the same instant, an' both uttered a simultaneous scream like a Comanche war-whoop, and both went off in a swoon on the minnit. I tell ye it was a funny snap. I'd seen the old man up here, and so I told the boys we might as well tote him hum!"

"Thank you. If you will carry him up to his room, I will pay you for your trouble," Vidocq said, now considerably excited, himself. "What became of the girl?"

"Guess they cared for her, back o' the stage."

"Do you know her name?"

"She's down on the bills as Edna Earl. That's all I know about her. To-night was her first night on."

Senseless Uncle Si was lugged up to his room, and laid on the bed, and then, after paying the men and dismissing them Vidocq set to work upon the unconscious farmer.

It did not take long to restore him and the old Vermontar sat bolt upright in bed, and glared wildly about him.

"Stella! Stella!" he cried. "Ha! where is she? Merciful God, has she gone! She was there, a minute ago—there! there!—there!"

"Oh! shut up!" cried Vidocq. "What's ailin' you? Got a touch of the jim-jams, hain't you?"

"No! I've no jim-jams! I saw her yonder, only a moment ago, singing on the stage. Ha! where am I? Is that you, Vidocq?"

"Yes, it is I, and you're layin' on your bed at the hotel!"

"How did I come here?"

"You were brought in by four men, who found you lying drunk in the street!" laughed Val.

"You lie, blame you! I was not drunk. I was at the theater, and she came out and begun to sing—she—my child—my Stella! She see'd me the same minute I see'd her, and we both gave a cry of recognition. Then, I see'd her throw up her arms and fall, and—I—I guess I collapsed myself!"

"That's precisely what you did, old man, and now if you'll promise to lie here quiet, I'll hasten to the hall and see if I can find this singer!"

"All right, my boy, only hurry up before she has time to escape!"

Vidocq lost no time in leaving the hotel, and hurrying to the concert hall, which he found just closing up.

"I want to see Edna Earl, the girl that fainted!" he said, collaring the manager.

"Where will I find her?"

"Haven't the slightest idea, sir."

"Don't you know where she lives?"

"No! She's a new hand."

"Will she appear again to-morrow night?"

"Reckon not. I paid her off, and told her to skip. I ain't er-goin' to have no faintin' business nor any mystery on my stage, now you can bet!"

Vidocq felt at the moment as if he would like to give that noble manager a chance to faint, but wisely concluded to postpone the ceremony until some other time.

So nothing was left him but to return to the hotel, and break the sad information to Uncle Si, that Edna Earl could not be found.

On hearing this the old gent blubbered outright, and for a time, was inconsolable, but Vidocq finally quieted him down with the doubtful probability that he would be able to find the songstress in the morning, as no stage left camp between until then.

And so the matter had to rest.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DWARF'S MISSION.

UNCLE SILOA'S visit to the residence of Charles Covington, had not been productive of any good, evidently, so far as concerned the latter's peace of mind, for that evening, after the old Vermonter's departure, Covington sat in the library of his well-furnished house, a scowl upon his face that betokened bad humor.

"Yes, the old cuss is here!" he muttered, "and something has got to be done. That he is here for a purpose, is beyond question, or else he would not have that nimble-fisted detective in his employ. The very fact that my efforts to pump him were unavailing, conclusively proves that the detective has put him on his guard, and learned him the lesson of the wary."

"This fellow, Vidocq, is no doubt as sharp as a razor, but if he gets in my way, he will wish he was never born, curse him! It may not be me they are figuring for. Anyhow, I have played my part well, so far, and I don't believe a suspicion has been aroused against me. I'll continue to soft-soap the old verdant for awhile, until I see what racket the detective is up to; then, I'll put on the thumb-screws! Hal! the deuce!"

The latter exclamation was caused by the discovery that he was not alone.

Standing just within the room, was a person whom he appeared to recognize, and yet had not expected to see.

This man was Hero Hicks, the dwarf, and there was a hideous grin upon his ugly countenance as he noted the rich man's surprise.

"No, et ain't the devil, Mister Covington—tho' mebbe I'd look like his satanic majesty's double if I had the horns and tail! You seem surprised to see me!"

Covington smothered an imprecation, and drawing a self-cocking revolver, laid it upon the table beside him.

"Sit down!" he ordered. "What brings you here?"

"Oh! a force of circumstances over which I had no control. My hand got tangled up in the halter of a boss, and I couldn't get it free, and so the boss and I made it up together to elope. That's all. Besides, your dutiful brother, in his pilgrimage of over a year, has gathered up some valuable information which you might desire to possess!"

Covington turned a shade paler.

"What do you mean?" he demanded sharply.

"Oh! I was simply referring to that robbery you—"

Here the dwarf suddenly paused, for the revolver was outstretched, on a level with his heart.

"Satan seize you!" Covington cried. "Dare to utter those words again and I'll murder

you! I've a good mind to put a bullet through your cowardly heart, as it is!"

Hicks laughed, defiantly.

"Go ahead and do it! I dare you! When I die, you're doomed! I have you in my power, beloved brother, an' ye know et, too, and if it wasn't fer the bloodhounds of the law I would have had you by the throat, long ere this!"

He spoke with the savage earnestness of one who full well knew the mastery he held.

And Charles Covington realized the threat implied, for he laid down his revolver.

"Oh! well, let it drop," he growled. "I've nothing special against you, only don't talk so loud. You don't know who may be listening."

"I don't care much, either," was the dogged declaration. "You've got to give in sooner or later, anyhow, and I'm gittin' tired fightin' your battles, 'thout gittin' any pay for it, you can bet! If it hadn't been for me, the officers would 'a' been heer searchin' for you, a week ago. By a little maneuverin' I finally got 'em off on another trail. That's a detective hyer in town, what, like enough, has got a warrant for the Honorable—"

"Utter that name and you're a dead man!" and again Covington had grasped the revolver, and leveled it at the dwarf, while his eyes glowed like balls of fire.

"Oh! well, put down that pop!" Hicks said, carelessly. "Since you are so sensitive about names, I'll not mention any."

So Covington laid down the revolver once more.

"You'd better not!" he growled. "I know there's a detective in camp, but don't believe he is looking for me. My disguise is so perfect that I'd be willing to stake a good deal my identity wouldn't be suspected were there a dozen detectives here."

"You don't know!" Hicks grinned. "Them red whiskers of yours may take a drop, some time, and give you away!"

"Little danger of that, I guess. Nevertheless, now that you are here, I want you to be alive to my interests. How much money do you want to keep your mouth shut, and your eyes and wits on the alert?"

"For looking after the one case, I don't want a cent, but, for another case, it's a different thing. It will require something of a boodle to settle up the other business!"

Covington started, violently!

"What do you mean?" he savagely demanded, glaring at the dwarf, as if he would like to annihilate him. "Speak, before I brain you!"

Hicks laughed, sarcastically.

"What's the matter of you, anyhow? You're as rambunctious as a young billy-goat, and yet you know mighty well you can't scare me worth a cent. What I mean is, that, while you have been living here, in fancied security, supposing you were never to be disturbed, you have been laboring under a great delusion. She still lives!"

"Still lives?" and Charles Covington sunk back in his arm-chair, as white as a ghost.

"Yes, she still lives!" repeated Hicks, "and, what is more, she's after you, bent upon seeking vengeance!"

"Go on! go on! Tell me all!" the discomfited villain faintly commanded, wiping the beads of perspiration from his brow.

"Well, the way I come to know what I do, is this," Hicks answered: "Not havin' the price of a ride on the stage, a few days ago, I had to hoof it, and one night it come up a thunderin' big storm, and I had to skurry for shelter. I see'd a light in the mountain-side, and made fer it, an' soon found myself in a cave, where a woman was cookin' some meat over a fire. And, may Satan kick me if it wasn't her!"

"I couldn't b'lieve the evidence o' my senses, at first, but, when she recognized me, an' ordered me to git, I know'd I was not mistaken. It was her, alive an' well, an' the kid was along with her—the very image o' her it is, too!"

"I begged so hard not to be driven out in ther storm, that she finally guv in, an' let me remain, an' give me some o' her supper. Gradually we fell into conversation, an' the subject turned on you. She said that she had found out that you were living here in Sockdolager, under the assumed name of Charles Covington—living here in fancied security, surrounded by wealth and luxury, while, for nearly five years, she had had to undergo a bitter struggle to miserably support her child and herself."

"She said she was coming to Sockdolager, with but one purpose in view, and that was to be revenged upon you. You had ruined her life she said, and forever alienated her from her once happy home, and she had but one object in view, and that was to kill you!"

Covington shuddered, as he heard these words, and grew if anything paler than before.

"Well, at first," continued Hicks, "I stoutly denied that you war here, but she only laughed at me, and told me I was only wasting breath. She knew you were here."

"Then I tried the conciliatory racket. I spouted about what a terrible thing murder was, an' asked her ef she didn't think matters could not be fixed up satisfactorily, on a different basis. I told her that you were firmly rooted her, with a populace to obey your very wish, and you could not be supplanted. I told her you were already aware of her coming, and had prepared for it, and that if she came to town, she would be quietly put out of existence, and no one would be the wiser for her disappearance. Oh! I tell ye, I talked turkey to her, like a nateral-born lawyer."

"Waal, ye may believe as ye like, but my argument carried weight. She thought the matter over fer awhile, an' then went an' kissed her child, an' remained wi' it fer awhile. Then, she come back, and said that she didn't know but my reasonin' was good, but under no consideration, would she let anything deter her from her purpose, except she were to receive a sum of money sufficient to comfortably support herself and child during life."

"I told her, that, to save yerself from the necessity of doing you further injury, you would be willing to make terms, and asked her what she would be willing to settle for. At first, she said not a cent less than twenty thousand dollars, but I kept on argyin', and finally got her down to ten thousand, upon the receipt of which she promises to return eastward, and never bother you. If I bring the money to her, within ten days, all right. If I fail to return to her within the specified time, she will attempt her vengeance, and strike you when you're off yer guard. So there you have the facts, just as they are, and you can do as you please!"

As he finished speaking, the dwarf leaned back in his chair, and lit his pipe; while Charles Covington arose and paced to and fro across the room, his brows knitted in an ugly scowl.

Suddenly, however, he burst out into a sardonic laugh.

"Oh! yes; I'll give her ten thousand dollars, I will!" he cried. "If she shows her face in Sockdolager I'll give her ten inches of steel, which will be better. The woman never lived that can bulldoze me! You ought to know it!"

"Well, suit yerself, me royal limb!" Hicks retorted, relapsing into his slang way of speaking. "It's your funeral, not mine. You're an ugly-lookin' cuss, with a fair degree of common sense. I'm a dandy, when my red whiskers ain't so long, and smarter than chain-lightnin'. That's the difference 'twixt us. I know mighty well what I'd do, ef it were my case!"

"Well, what would you do?"

"I'd give her the boodle, and call it quits!"

"Why so, you fool? Do you think, for an instant, that I am afraid of that woman?"

"It's not the being afraid part, beloved brother. She's desperate, and desperation breeds cunning. She will come here, on the sly, and, even if she don't succeed in killing you, she will give you dead away, and create a deuce of a commotion, and the news will spread like wild-fire that you ain't Charles Covington, but Mr. So & So, and this will get to the ears of the other officers, who ain't forty miles away, and you'll suddenly find yourself in red-hot water!"

Covington took to pacing the floor again.

"Well, ain't I right?" Hicks demanded, in triumph.

"I don't know but you are," was the sullen reply. "I can ill-afford to give up all this money to the accursed woman!"

"Better so than give up all your mining interests, and your life in the bargain!"

"True. How much time have I got to think this matter over?"

"To reach the cave by the expiration of the tenth day, I must leave here at sunset, to-morrow night, on a good horse!"

"Very well. I will make up my mind how I shall act in the matter by to-morrow noon. Leave me to myself, now!"

Hicks departed and the heartless scoundrel was alone, again.

CHAPTER VII.

A SURPRISE.

UNCLE SI SLOAT was so nervous over what had occurred at the concert hall, that he was afraid to remain alone in his room over-night, and insisted that Vidocq should spend the night with him, instead of seeking his own apartment.

To this the young man assented, although he well knew that little sleep would visit his eyes.

Uncle Si dropped asleep soon after retiring, but not so with the detective. He sat in his chair by the open window all night long, and divided his time between smoking and meditating.

He was trying to form some plan of operation for the work ahead, but it was a most difficult thing to do. That the variety singer was really Sloat's daughter, there seemed no reason to doubt, else why had she fainted at sight of him? Surely the old man was not so homely in appearance as to have frightened her, for the foot-light favorites are not proverbially a very timid race.

Naturally, the old man must have recognized her, and she him. It remained then a foregone conclusion that Edna Earl, the vocalist, was the farmer's unfortunate daughter Stella.

But, why had she hastened from the theater, after recovering from her faint, and not sought to find her parent, whom she had not seen for seven years?

Was she afraid to meet him?

It would seem so.

So many and varied were the detective's thoughts, that he at last grew tired of thinking, and glad he was when day once more dawned, bright and rosy.

Old Si was sleeping soundly, so putting on his hat—for he had not otherwise undressed—he stole from the room and went down stairs.

Sockdolager was an early-rising town, most of the miners being abroad as soon as it was daybreak, to get a before-breakfast "bracer."

As on the preceding morning, Vidocq sauntered idly through the camp, and enjoyed the refreshing air. He scrutinized the various habitations he passed, and sought to determine which one might shelter Miss Edna Earl, the vocalist; but this seemed a hopeless quest, and after a somewhat extended walk he returned to the hotel for breakfast, which he found in waiting for him, most of the guests having already eaten.

Breakfast over, Vidocq held a long conversation with Uncle Si, upon the piazza, the result of which seemed highly satisfactory, for the old farmer greatly brightened up, and was more cheerful, after the detective arose and re-entered the hotel.

Later on Vidocq left the hotel, and sauntered leisurely toward the more prominent tent of Mlle. Leonora.

Just before reaching it, he encountered Elephant Eph, the leader of the Executive Committee, who approached with a swagger, and a villainous leer upon his ugly countenance.

"Hello! thar!" he saluted. "I say, you young galoot, you think you're quite a Jim-dandy, don't yer, now?"

"Why, to be sure I do!" Vidocq replied, good-naturedly. "Don't you?"

"No, I don't, an' her Kermitty don't, neither. We'll give in ye ruther bluffed us, night afore last, but ye can't do et, ag'in."

"No?"

"No, sir-ee! You're a snide an' a sucker, from the word go, an' ain't wu'th the room you take up. So ther Kermitty held a high mass last night, and resolutions were proposed and adopted to the effect that ef ye didn't skip ther town within twenty-four hours after being warned, ye war to be shot down 'thout further notice from us. I war then deputized, and do hereby give ye notice to get up and git, within ther specified time, under the penalty of death!"

"You don't say so!"

"But, I do, ye know, an', w'at's more, I mean it!"

"Well, Mr. Chawemup, or whatever your name may be, permit me to politely, and unostentatiously inform you that I haven't the slightest idea or intention of leaving this town until I get good and ready. In the words of the immortal Walt Whitman, I don't scare worth a cent—especially, not at the bark of a pack of dirty curs, such as constitute that great governing body, the Executive Committee of Sockdolager City!"

"Oho! so we're curs, are we?"

"You bet and of the worst description, too!"

"Durn yer impudence, d'ye know what I've a cussed good mind to do?"

"Haven't the slightest idea, 'pon my word."

"Waal, I've a durned good notion, ter take ther responsibility off ther Kermitty's hands an' do ye up, myself!"

"An excellent and self-sacrificing idea, by Jove!" was Vidocq's unruffled reply. "There's no time like the present, and a man might better lose a fortune than allow a golden opportunity to go by unheeded. Here we are, all alone, and the wind which is blowing from the north drives

your breath against me. It's strong enough, Heaven knows, to knock me down, and you ought to be big enough to finish the job."

"Oh! yer mighty smart, ain't yer?"

"Bet I am! I was brought up on smartweed tea and lightning-rod soup!"

"Waal, I'm jest ther galoot as kin take some o' the smartness out o' you, an' I'm goin' ter do et, too, or my handle ain't Elephant Eph."

"All right, my strong-scented pachyderm; I'm your lobster, with the red claws, every day in a week, and twice on Sunday!"

Elephant Eph made no reply, but peeled off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and advanced stealthily toward the object of his animosity, while the younger and smarter man squared himself, in a professional attitude, to resist the assault.

But, the battle was not destined to take place, for, just as the men were about to begin the fight, an unforeseen interference took place.

This interference came in the shape of Mademoiselle Leonora, who suddenly appeared around the corner of her tent, and stepped between the two men, with a pair of revolvers in her grasp.

"You men shall not fight!" she cried in a tone that rung with emphasis. "If there's any fighting to be done, here, I'll take a hand in it!"

Elephant Eph uttered a snort of rage, while, as for Vidocq, he backed off, in amused astonishment.

"I'd like to know what in thunder business you've got meddlin' in our affairs?" Elephant Eph gruffly demanded.

"There's going to be no fight!" Leonora declared, promptly. "Pick up your coat, and mosey or I shall be under the necessity of blowing your head off!"

"Oh! ye will, hey?"

"I will, so get out of here, instant or take the consequence, you big loafer!" and one of the revolvers came quickly to a level.

The Executive Committeeman hesitated no longer, but picking up his coat, stalked away, swearing furiously.

Then, Leonora turned abruptly and returned to her tent, leaving Vidocq standing alone.

CHAPTER VIII. THE INTERVIEW.

In the course of his active detective experience, Deadwood Dick, Jr., had experienced many surprises, but none so provokingly disconcerting as the present one.

The fact that Leonora had neither looked at, nor spoken to him, placed him in a decidedly awkward and embarrassing position.

It had been his intention to visit and interview the mysterious locator, but he changed his purpose, and walked away.

"Confound the luck," he muttered. "I'd have run the risk of getting thumped by the big brute rather than had her interfere. Why did she do it? Well, I'll know the reason why or my name isn't Vidocq," and with sudden decision he turned about and retraced his footsteps.

The entrance to the tent consisted of a door frame, and a plain wooden door, which was supplied with a lock.

Reaching the tent, he rapped gently upon the closed portal.

Little Fern answered the summons.

"Is your mamma in?" Vidocq asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I would like to have an interview with her."

"All right. Come in, sir!"

The detective entered and little Fern closed the door behind him.

Vidocq found, when once inside, that the tent was divided into two compartments by a strip of canvas.

The outer room was furnished only with chairs. To one of these the child motioned the detective. When he was seated she held out her hand, gazing at him curiously.

"Oh, you want to shake hands, do you, little one?" Vidocq asked. "Well, that's a nice girl," and he extended his own hand.

"No; I want ten dollars," Fern replied, not offering to "shake."

At which Vidocq laughed.

"Oh! that is it, eh? Always be sure you get your money before you part with your flowers, and then you'll never get left."

So he gave her a ten-dollar gold-piece, when she at once darted behind the canvas partition. Mlle. Leonora soon made her appearance, black-clad and masked, and became seated.

"Do you wish to see me, sir?" she asked.

"Yes, madam. I understand that you make it a part of your business to locate mines, and have been quite successful at it?"

"Yes, sir. I have located several paying mines in this camp."

"So I am credibly informed. Now, my case is as follows: I am in the employ of a gentleman of moderate means, but of a speculative turn of mind. Most Southern gentlemen in this region are that way, perhaps you are aware. Well, I have told my employer of your wondrous gift, and he has sent me to see what it will cost him to have you locate a mine. If your price is not too steep, I presume you can secure a ready cash customer."

"Of what religious faith is your employer?" mademoiselle asked, rather indifferently.

Vidocq smiled as he responded:

"I don't know as I ought to give him away, but the fact is he is a confirmed spiritualist—believes in spiritual manifestations, rappings, and such stuff. He has been trying to convert me to his faith, but, as I don't cotton to the article, I'm seriously afraid he will find me rather a refractory patient."

"Your employer is right," Leonora decided. "I will go abroad to-night, and if I have my usual luck, will locate him a paying claim. My terms are five hundred dollars, cash in advance."

"Very well. I don't think he will kick at that price. I will bring him here, after dinner, and the arrangements can be completed."

"It is not necessary that you should accompany him, is it?"

"Absolutely. He may want to talk with you, and I am the only one who can make him hear, not by my voice, but by my fingers, you see. He is totally deaf."

"How unfortunate! Very well, bring him after dinner."

Vidocq bowed, and bidding the mysterious woman good-day, took his departure.

"Now for the test!" he muttered. "If the old man is only equal to the emergency, I can mighty soon tell whether my suspicions are correct or not; for, as I live, I believe that under the mask of Ma'm'selle Leonora is concealed the face of Stella Sloat!"

This suspicion had haunted the mind of the detective since the first glimpse he had got of the mysterious locator, and learned that little Fern called her mamma.

He reached the hotel, to find Uncle Si anxiously awaiting his arrival.

"Well, young man," the former demanded, "anything new?"

"Things are working lovely, daddy," Vidocq replied. "I have made arrangements for you to go down into your pocket this afternoon and invest five hundred dollars, as an earnest of your spiritualistic faith!"

"Waal, ef yer s'pishuns turn out kereet, I won't mind spendin' the five hundred any more than I us'ter mind spendin' a ten-cent shinplaster," Uncle Si declared. "But, if the woman don't prove to be Stella, I dunno but I'd ruther invest the money in a gravestun factory."

"Well, I, too, shall be disappointed if the result of my test is a failure," Vidocq said. "During our interview to-day she watched me like a hawk through those eyeholes in her mask, as if suspicious that I was working up a scheme."

"She did, eh? Well, Stella was a smart gal, ef I do say et; but—but blame me if I ever knew her to go gallavantin' around in her sleep. Ef any one was to do sech a thing up at Perkins's Cross Roads, thar'd somebody get filled full o' buckshot mighty quick!"

"We are to visit the mademoiselle after dinner, and it won't take me long to form an opinion whether she is or is not your daughter. Our success depends a great deal upon you. I have given you all the necessary instructions, I think, and if you but carry them out to the letter, that's all I shall require of you!"

"Oh! you needn't fear about me. I kin hold my own, when I set my mind onto it. I'm ter be as deaf as a town pump, eh?"

"Yes."

"And am not to betray by any sign that I hev any suspicjon who she is?"

"Exactly."

"And am to ask only the questions you told me to? Waal, ef Old Si don't go thr'u the ordeal, high whisky proof, jest hit him with a hoe-handle. But, mind ye, ef she begins to blubber, an' show onmistakable sign thet she's my darter, ye mustn't object ef I give a snort or two myself."

"Certainly not!" Vidocq laughed. "I won't kick, in that case, if you screech like a locomotive whistle!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TEST AND ITS RESULT.

THE forenoon passed quickly, and at last the time arrived for Vidocq and Uncle Si to visit the tent of Leonora the Locator, so they left the Sandy Bar Hotel.

"Now, all you want is to keep a stiff upper lip, uncle," the detective said, "and the battle is half won."

"Oh! I sha'n't even sneeze, if she don't!" the old man replied. "The old man knows a thing or two, if he was brought up among the 'tater-hills."

Arriving at the tent, Vidocq rapped upon the door, which was immediately opened by little Fern, and both men entered and took seats.

Fern then retired, and Mlle. Leonora soon emerged from the inner room, and, bowing politely to her visitors, took a seat.

Her manner was easy and graceful, and she was apparently as much composed as though alone in her own parlor. No nervousness—not the slightest show of agitation did she evince.

Vidocq was never more puzzled, for he had studied her every action intently.

"Ma'm'selle!" he said, "this is my employer, of whom I spoke—Mr. Silas Sloat. I have told him the substance of our interview, and he has concluded that he will engage you to locate him a claim."

"Very well, sir," Leonora replied. "You can tell the gentleman, that, for my stipulated price I will endeavor to find him a paying lead. There is far more mineral wealth in this gulch than any one dreams of, and, strangest of all, the veins appear to be non-connecting. Without doubt, there is plenty of gold for all who are willing to work for it."

Vidocq turned to Uncle Si and performed a series of gymnastics with his fingers, after which the old man said:

"Yes, marm, my friend here has been tellin' me about ther wonderful things you do, an' as I ruther believe in the speerits havin' suthin' to do wi' earthly things, I don't mind riskin' a few dollars on yer luck. Ye see, Betsy an' I aire gittin' too fur along in years to grub our finger-nails out any more on the old farm, an' as we've got a comfortable penny laid up for a rainy day, I thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to try an' speckilate a little. Ye see, marm, we hain't got no children, Betsy an' I ain't; no one but our poor old selves!" and here the old man's voice trembled with emotion. "We had a girl once, an' she was as pretty an' bright as any you could find. But, she nearly broke our hearts by runnin' away an' marryin' a city chap, an' that's the last we have ever heard of her. S'pose she's some big city lady these times, an' has fer-got all about the lonely old folks at home. But the Lord knows, ef she are poor an' lonely, she'd be welcome to come back to us, fer she'd be a mighty lot o' comfort to us, an' it would seem jes' like old times up at Perkins's Cross Roads again. Our Stella was a smart gal, an' no mistake, but, that's the way the world goes. The smartest seem ter be ther weakest to temptation. D'ye say yer price war five hundred dollars, marm?"

Mademoiselle Leonora simply nodded.

"Five hundred, eh? Waal, that's a purty considerable big sum, but I guess it won't break Uncle Si, by a long shot!" and the old man chuckled, as he took out his pocketbook, which Vidocq had previously returned to him, and began to count out the money!

And Vidocq!

He sat there as motionless as an image carved of stone. He had listened to old Si's little story, much moved by the real pathos with which the words were delivered; and he had watched Leonora narrowly, and with what result?

None, whatever!

She had heard the bereaved father's recital, as coldly impassive and irresponsible as a block of marble, showing no particular interest in what was said, and apparently betraying no emotion, whatever.

Vidocq was puzzled, disappointed.

He was tempted to jump up, and clutch the woman by the throat, she was so indifferent to Si's heartfelt confession.

An hour before, Vidocq would have staked his life that Leonora and Stella were one and the same person; but now, what was he to think?

If this woman was old Sloat's daughter, the art of a wonderful actress had been combined most perfectly with her early musical training.

But her object? Did she write the letter to Perkins's Cross Roads?

If so, its tone was utterly at variance with her present demeanor. Either the latter, or her present coolness, was a lie on its very face.

"Waal, heer is the five hundred dollars," Uncle Si said, handing a bunch of bills to Vidocq. "Count et over, Vidocq, an' make sure et's right. I don't want to cheat the lady, fer et can't be sed of Si Sloat thet he ever cheated a person, in his life."

Vidocq counted it, and extended it to Leonora.

"It's all right," he said.

"Very well," she responded, quietly; "you can call to-morrow forenoon and I will give you a map!"

She arose, then, and taking this as a hint that all the business was transacted, Vidocq and Sloat also arose, and took their departure.

"Waal, I've went an' gone and did it!" Uncle Si said, as they made their way leisurely back toward the hotel. "Et's my first speckillation, an' ef that five hundred dollars don't fetch me in a gold-mine it'll be my last speckillation!"

"You're evidently thinking more of your money than of your daughter!" Vidocq observed, sarcastically, for the truth be told, he was not in the best of humor.

"Pooh! that woman ain't my Stella no more'n my foot's your head!"

"How do you know?"

"Because, I know she ain't. D'ye s'pose, if she was my Stella, she'd 'a' sot thar all thr'u' my stump speech an' never sed boo? Not much!"

"Well, I know it seems strange, but did you not detect anything about her or her ways, to remind you of your lost daughter?"

Uncle Si reflected a moment.

"No, I can't say as I did. Once, when she war tellin' about ther wealth o' this gulch, thar war suthin' about her manner of speech that recalled a memory of my girl; but I can't jest seem to remember what it was. Ther only thing that caused me ter believe we were on the right track, I see'd when we went into the tent."

"And what was that?"

"The purty little gal."

"Ah! I saw you looking at her."

"Yes, sir, she is the livin' picter of what my Stella was, eighteen or nineteen year ago!"

"Strange—strange! If *this* be so, then ma'm'selle must surely be your daughter."

"It can't be possible, sir—it can't be possible. Why, my gal Stella uster have a mighty tender heart, an' thought the world of us and of the old homestead, for she was never much of a hand to go around a-visitin' the neighbors; but this critter with the mask on, she's got a heart as tough as a grind-stun. Why, if that were Stella, when I were speakin' about the old home an' about how as I an' Betsy were gettin' old, an' about how if our daughter were poor an' lonely we'd welcome her back, an' she'd be sech a comfort to us—d'ye mean to say if *that* were Stella she'd sot there like a duimny an' never said I, no or yes? Not much! She 'a' flew to my arms, an' nigh about cried her eyes out wi' joy. No, no, detective; that ain't my child, an' I begin to fear I shall never find her after all my trip 'way out heer."

"Don't get discouraged, uncle—don't get discouraged!" Vidocq said, consolingly, although, in truth, his words belied his own feelings. "You don't know me yet. I'm one of the kind of fellows who don't give up where there is a ray of hope. The times are not a few when I have stood within hand-shaking distance of grim death. I've taken hold of this case of yours more out of liking for you than for money; and, mark my word, I'm going to find your daughter if she is alive. I am not quite through with this masked mademoiselle yet!"

Uncle Si shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll fool away your time botherin' with her!" he declared.

"Maybe so, maybe not," Vidocq replied. "I wouldn't like to bet a thousand, now, that this Leonora isn't your daughter. If you saw your daughter at the concert-hall, and you recognized each other, the very fact that she did not come in search of you proves that she does not wish to meet you. Either she is ashamed to face you, owing to her folly, or else she dreads lest you should severely censure her. These are the only ways I can look at the matter."

"Well, go ahead and make what you can out of it," the farmer said, with a long drawn sigh, as they reached the hotel piazza. "As for my part, I'm clean tired out and disgusted with the whole business."

Vidocq went to his room for a nap, for it will be remembered he had not slept any the night before.

He left Si upon the piazza, but when he came down-stairs, a couple of hours later, the old gent had disappeared.

"Gone over to see Covington, I suppose," the detective commented, and thought nothing more about the matter.

CHAPTER X.

A CLEAN KNOCK-OUT.

AT about the same time that Vidocq and Uncle Si were paying their respects to Mademoiselle Leonora, Charles Covington was entertaining a visitor.

The two were seated at a table in the cosey parlor, and each were supplied with a bottle of wine, and a glass.

"Waal, boss!" the visitor was saying, and he was none other than Elephant Eph, leader of the so-called Executive Committee, "et ain't often I set foot in sech quarters as these, but, sence you have sent for me, I'll sample this ere wine. Et's the furst taste o' wine I've had in years. Et's only you nabobs what kin have wine. We poorer cusses hev ter put up wi' forty-rod lightnin'. But, go ahead, boss, and spit out what ye want of me, fur, durn my cats ef I wasn't surprised when I got notiss to pay you a visit!"

Covington lit a cigar, and tipped lazily back in his chair.

"Eph!" he said, "I hear you're out of work!"

"Yas, I am, cuss the luck! I had a row wi' the mine boss an' licked him, an' got discharged!"

"Humph! must it come pretty hard on a fellow who likes his whisky as well as you do, to be without money?"

"Hard? Waal, I should say so! Every slate in ther camp is broke, so far as I am concerned, an' I hev to hustle like hickory to git a drink!"

"How would you like to make a few dollars—say enough to keep you in bug-juice from now till snow falls?"

The ruffian brightened up wonderfully, at this evidently unexpected question.

"How would I?" he echoed, eagerly. "Waal, you show me the way to do it an' see how quick I'll snap you up!"

"I ain't sure whether you can be trusted?"

"Try me an' see. I never goes back on them as employs me, you bet! I ain't no blab-mouth, an' ef I tackles a job that's a little off color, why, I'm ther boyee as sez nothin'!"

"You're not overburdened, then, with conscientious scruples?"

"Not a scruple, ef I knows myself."

"Then, I'm inclined to think you are the man I want. There's a person in town who is in my way, and I want him removed. Do you think you can do the job?"

"I reckon I can try. Ain't werry partick'ler what the job is, so long as it fetches in the rhine. What's the lay, anyhow?"

"Well, there's a fellow in town who calls himself Vidocq. He is a detective!"

"I know him! I know him!" declared Elephant Eph, "and I've got it in for the cuss, too!"

"So much the better. I suspect he is here with the intention of making me trouble, and, as I am not in condition or position to experience any trouble, just now, I want this individual put out of the way. It must be done quietly and cautiously, so that no blame can ever be attached to me!"

"Oh! I understand!" Eph declared, "an' ye couldn't have selected a better man fer the job. Every one knows we're enemies, he and I, an' so I'll get him inter a fight, an' ef I don't put an end to his earthly career ye kin call me a liar. You know how I fixed Ike Davis, don't ye?"

"Yes, but this Vidocq I understand is a born thoroughbred!"

"Don't keer if he is. I kin fix him, as any other galoot that ever sot foot in Sockdolager!"

"I'd prefer you'd do the job in some other way, where I'd be sure he was dead!"

"And, I prefer to do et *my* way!" the ruffian declared. "If I war to shute him, or knife him, in cold blood, that would be outright murder! But, if I get him into a fight and kill him in that way, I'll be the hero of the hour, an' no one can tech me, or at least no one will."

"Cut, how do you expect to do him with simply your fists?"

"Leave *that* to me. I know a few tricks about fighting that you know nothing about. You pay me for the job and your man will be a corpse before sunset!"

"How much do you want?"

"What will ye give?"

Covington reflected.

He stood in constant fear that Vidocq was after him. To have the enemy put out of the way, would at least, as he supposed, insure him temporary safety, and he could afford to pay well for it.

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. Go ahead and get rid of the fellow, any way you choose, so that I am not implicated, and when the job is done, come to me, and I will give you two hundred and fifty dollars!"

"Yas, that's all right, boss, but I can't tech no sech delicut job as that unless I git my spondules in advance!"

"Very well, don't tackle it, then. I never

make it a point to pay for work until it's finished. I can get plenty of men to do the favor for half the price I have offered you!"

Elephant Eph, whose surname was Price, was not a fool by any means. He knew that Covington's statement was near to the truth; there were plenty of ruffians in the camp who would not stop at any crime for the sake of earning a few dollars.

"Well, we won't kick about ther pay in advance, then," the giant said, "providin' I'm sure o' gittin' it, after I do the job!"

"Of course you'll get it. If you don't, couldn't you turn and make it warm for me?"

"That's so. I hadn't thought of that. Well, I'll do the job."

"Very well. When you can prove it is done, you can call for your money. You may go now."

"All right, boss, jes' as soon as I finish this wine!"

Nor did he leave his seat until the contents of the bottle had disappeared down his throat.

He then took his departure.

About the middle of the afternoon, that same day, he espied Vidocq seated upon the piazza of the Sandy Bar Hotel.

There were also a dozen or more other guests lounging about, taking their ease, and drinking in the refreshing breeze that blew down from the pine-scented mountains.

"Now's my time!" the giant muttered, an evil glitter in his eyes. "He's either got to fight me, or stand branded a coward before the crowd!"

So he stalked over toward the hotel and paused in front of the piazza, arms akimbo and head erect.

"Hillo, thar, ye blood-suckin' sport!" he roared, pointing his index finger at Vidocq. "You're jest the medicine I want ter analyze. Will ye hev the condescenshun ter step down heer an' tickle my chin with a feather?"

Very well did the detective know what was coming, but was perfectly composed and prepared for battle, if it came to that.

"You'd better go along about your business," he calmly observed, looking the giant full in the eye. "If you are looking for fight, go among the class of animals to which you belong."

"Animals, hey? Great whoopin' Jehosephat! Animals! I'm not a human being, eh? Well, I should cavort! I'm so human I kin lick any galoot in this town, don't you forget it, an' you aire ther very cuckoo I'm lookin' fer, you durned loafer. If thar's a spark o' vitality about ye, why jest step right down heer, an' we'll have a squar' out-an'-out fight. You an' I can't breathe ther same air what circulates in this hyer camp, an' one on us has got to drop off ther list. So ef yer got ther least spark o' spunk, come and see me, and I'll do ye up so quick thet yer teeth won't hev a chance to chatter. Tha's me, an' I'm right heer. D'ye heer me murmur?"

Vidocq maintained a positive silence, which only served to aggravate the giant all the more.

"Ye'r a coward!" the latter roared. "Ye'r a dirty loafer what can't lick a cat. Ye'r a coward what dassent fight like a man w' yer fists. Ye'r a sneakin' cur, an' yer father was before ye! And as for your mother—"

"Scoundrel!" and Vidocq was on his feet in an instant, a terrible glitter in his eyes.

"Oh, thet hit in a tender spot, did et?" snorted the Elephant. "Thot it would. All pride must have a fall, sooner or later, but I can't help tellin' them men on ther platform thar, thet yer mother used ter go round with a goat and a cart, a-gatherin' swill fer the hogs thet she kept in her kitchen."

Some of the guests on the platform snickered, and cast an inquiring glance at the detective to see if he would resent the gross insult.

And they were not to be disappointed.

Vidocq quietly removed his coat and vest, and placed them upon his chair. Then he descended the piazza steps as calmly as though he was going for a stroll, and confronted the ruffian who had insulted the sacred name of his parents.

"Now, you ruffian," he cried, "you shall have all the fight you want. You have not only intentionally insulted me, but also my respected and honored parents, long since dead. It was not my intention to pay any attention to your brute's bluster, but you have forced me to meet you; so square yourself, and may the best man win!"

Perfectly cool and collected was the young detective while speaking, as he stood facing his would-be antagonist, with his arms folded across his breast.

"All right, me lad! I'm ther man as kin do ye, an' do ye right!" Eph declared, beginning to

strip. "I'm a knocker from Knockdown, I am, an' this ain't goin' to be no baby fight neither. You hev insulted ther town o' Sockdolager, by yer detesterble presence, an' I'm goin' to avenge the wrong!"

It took him but a few seconds to strip to the waist, and when he turned and faced Vidocq, a murmur of surprise went up from the fast gathering crowd.

He certainly was a man of superb physique, with an expansive chest, and brawny arms, whose every outer muscle stood out in bold prominence.

As compared with Vidocq the contrast was certainly startling, and had there been any pool selling on the coming event, the giant would surely have been the favorite, for the detective looked immeasurably inferior to him, in point of size and strength.

"Are you ready?"

It was Vidocq who put the question.

"Yas, I'm ready!" was the grim response.

"Then, let her go!"

This was the word the spectators were waiting for, and eagerly they watched the two men advance toward each other.

"It is goin' to be a tough fight!" commented Hines, the proprietor of the Sandy Bar. "The young fellow, however, is chock full of grit and science, and I'll bet any man the Sandy B'r Hotel against five hundred dollars, that he wins!"

Here was a chance for a hotel, right cheap, it would seem, but no one offered to take the bet.

In the mean time the two antagonists met, and, as a start-off, Vidocq sent a stinging blow full upon Price's cheek.

The blow was answered with a vengeance, but was neatly parried, while, in return, the giant received a terrific one full upon the proboscis, which flattened that useful member, perceptibly, and caused "the claret" to flow freely.

Eph backed off, and eyed his opponent savagely, for an instant, and then, with a savage oath, made a desperate lunge for him, intending to carry him off his feet; but quite aware of this intention Dick ducked, and, as a result, the giant, unable to check his momentum, went sprawling to the ground, his damaged nose plowing up the sandy soil.

He was game, however, for, rising and spitting out the dirt his capacious mouth had collected, he renewed the attack, fiercely.

It soon became evident that in point of science, he was no match for the Jim-dandy.

Vidocq's steel-like fists beat a savage tattoo upon his face, until it began to have the appearance of a piece of beefsteak.

Every time Vidocq gave his opponent a "good 'un," the crowd yelled with delight, for the Elephant was by no means a favorite with the majority of the citizens of Sockdolager.

Very few and harmless were the taps the detective got. It was a one-sided affair, all through, and those who had expected to see the bully come off victorious were greatly disappointed, when with a sweeping blow, the young athlete laid him out insensible, upon the street. Vidocq had received scarcely a scratch, and returned to the piazza, put on his coat, and sat down to enjoy a cigar, as coolly as though a nothing had happened.

As for the Elephant, he was picked up and carried off, and was not seen again, that day.

During the afternoon hand-bills were distributed about the camp, announcing that at eight o'clock that evening, Mlle. Leonora would make her first appearance in public, and give a free exhibition of her wonderful powers of mind-reading, the exhibition to take place upon the piazza of the Sandy Bar hotel.

A dollar a seat would be charged, and those not holding seats would be compelled to keep off the piazza.

It is scarcely necessary to add, that within ten minutes after the sale of seats began, every one was sold, only a short space having been reserved for the star of the evening.

CHAPTER XI.

A WONDERFUL WOMAN.

A GREAT deal more interest was centered about Mlle. Leonora, in the public mind, than would be supposed, for, by the time set for her appearance, as a mind-reader, a motley herd of people were gathered in front of the Sandy Bar Hotel, and still another crowd who occupied the chairs upon the piazza.

Vidocq had taken good care to secure a good seat, and had also obtained one for Uncle Si, but, up to the time for the performance to take place, the old gent had not put in an appearance.

Promptly at eight, as per announcement, mademoiselle made her appearance upon the piazza, and took up her position in the space set apart for her use.

Her arrival was greeted by cheers from the street and the clapping of hands by those on the porch.

She was attired in a dress of black silk, with a jaunty little bonnet upon her head, and the odious black mask upon her face. The sleeves of her dress were not of full length, and partly exposed to view a pretty pair of arms.

By a graceful bow she acknowledged the plaudits of the audience, and then advanced to the front of the piazza, and spoke, in a clear, ringing voice that could be heard by all the assemblage:

"At the earnest request of several of your citizens I have been prevailed upon to appear in public, and give a short exhibition of my powers as a mind-reader, trusting you will grant me your strict attention. I am aware that some hints have been spread about that I was a fraud, a sorceress, and some have even declared it their belief that I was in league with Satan himself. Of course all this is ridiculous as well as libelous, and I wish to prove to you that what I do is but the result of a peculiar gift, allotted to but few persons."

"My first exhibition will be of the power of being able to tell what any person may hold up in their hand, I being blindfolded at the time, and of course unable to see."

"Secondly, while blindfolded, I will tell the name and age of any person who may desire it, and also reveal the whereabouts of missing friends."

"My third and last act will be to allow some person of reliability to take a twenty-dollar piece, which I will furnish, and secrete it in some place within the Sandy Bar Hotel, I remaining, blindfolded, upon the piazza while the coin is being hidden. I will then arise, remove the bandage, and go straight to the place where the money is secreted."

"This I think will suffice to satisfy one and all that I am no impostor, but can do as I represent. I will now blindfold myself in such a manner that you can all see I cannot by any possibility see anything."

So saying, she drew a long strip of linen from her pocket, and wound it repeatedly around her head, so that it wholly covered the eye-holes of her mask.

"There!" she said. "I can see no more than if I were totally blind. Now, then, if some one of the audience will hold up an object I will tell what it is, without touching it! One at a time, please. Don't all speak at once."

"What's this?" demanded a miner from among the audience in front of the piazza.

"A bottle of whisky," was Leonora's prompt response.

And she was right. It was a bottle of whisky.

"What's this?" from another of the party.

"A handkerchief that needs washing!"

"And this?"

"A pocket-knife."

"And this?"

"A plug of tobacco."

"And this?"

"A revolver."

"What make is it?"

"Colt's."

Still more questions did the crowd put, regarding objects they held in their possession, and in each instance the marvelous mademoiselle gave correct answer.

How could she do it? The crowd were mystified. It was far more than they could understand.

Finally, when the opportunity afforded, Vidocq drew from his pocket the letter he had received from Uncle Si, and which purported to be from Stella Sloat to her former school-mate, one of the Perkins girls.

This he held up, and asked:

"What is this I have in my hand?"

"A letter," was the prompt answer.

"Who wrote it?"

"The signature is simply 'Stella'!"

"Can you tell me where the writer is?"

"I cannot!"

That Vidocq was astonished, all could see.

How did she know what he held in his hand, or what was the signature to the letter?

That the bandage prevented her using her eyes he was well satisfied.

Notwithstanding, she had told him, promptly and unhesitatingly, the nature of the object he held, and the signature attached thereto.

How had she done it?

Was there such a thing as second sight?

The detective had often heard so, but had

never believed in the thing, nor had he had any experience with such matters.

But, now, it seemed to be a verity that the mademoiselle could see and read, without the use of her eyes, no matter whether she did it by power of mind over mind, or not.

After a few more experiments of this sort, she announced that to any person who so desired, she would tell them their name and age, without first having seen them.

Of course there were ready applicants for this test, and by the dozen, too, but in each instance, Ma'm'selle satisfied them by telling them what was their name, the exact time of their birth, and their age to an hour.*

Among perhaps the last of Mlle.'s victims, if so they might be called, was Vidocq.

When there seemed a sort of lull in the series of questions, Vidocq spoke up.

"Ma'm'selle," he said, in a tone of voice wholly different from that used when previously addressing her, "can you tell me my name?" She hesitated a moment, before answering.

"Yes!" she finally answered.

"Very well. What is it?"

"The name you bear at present is Valentine Vidocq. That, however, is not your real name."

"Oh! it isn't, eh? Well, since you appear to be so confident perhaps you can tell me what my real name is?"

"Oh! yes, without a doubt!" she replied, and he fancied he detected a spice of triumph in her tone.

"Your name is Bristol—Richard Bristol—but you are perhaps better known through the Western Territories, as Deadwood Dick, Junior!"

Then, turning quickly to the audience, she added:

"That, ladies and gentlemen, will conclude the second portion of my performance. The next, and to you no doubt the most mystifying, will be the coin act. Behold! I hold between my thumb and forefinger, a twenty-dollar gold piece—a genuine coin, all right enough, and not different from any other, except that there is a private mark upon it by which I can distinguish it from another. This coin, I will pass into the hands of some reputable gentleman, here upon the platform, being blindfolded at the time, the same as now. The party who receives the coin is to pass into the hotel, and secrete the piece anywhere he may choose, so long as it is not locked up, or otherwise beyond my reach. Upon his return I will enter the hotel, unblindfolded, and find the coin, returning it to the man who hid it. This will prove that I can read the human mind as well as though it were the open page of a book. Now, then, who will oblige me by holding the coin?"

"I will," spoke up a man who hitherto had remained a silent but interested spectator.

"Ah! thanks!" Leonora said. "Your voice has an honest ring, and I will trust you, although you are a detective. Here is the gold-piece."

The man accepted the proffered coin, but his face rather comically portrayed how great was his surprise.

"Detective!" he echoed. "Who's a detective?"

"You are," Leonora replied good-naturedly. "I can even tell you your own name, but will refrain from doing so, as you may wish to remain incog. You have the coin now. Please make some mark upon it, so you will recognize it when you see it again. Then, go hide it somewhere within the hotel."

The detective, if such he was, obeyed her directions, and rising, entered the hotel.

He was gone some five minutes, when he returned and said:

"There! I have hidden the coin, and I'll bet my head you can't find it!"

"I'd advise you to keep your head," Leonora retorted, dryly. "Heads like yours are not auctioned off to the highest bidder every day."

She then waved her hand to the audience, removed the bandage, and passed into the hotel.

Something strange to relate, no one attempted to follow her, and the man whom she had called a detective, chuckled triumphantly, as she disappeared, and nudged the man to his right, who chanced to be Vidocq.

*The reader may, and perhaps naturally, too, construe the foregoing statement to be absolutely preposterous, because it comes from "a novel."—I write to say it has been demonstrated to the author that the thing can be done, as when in a strange city, a "so-called" mind-reader, who had never seen him before or been seen by him, told him his name, place of birth, time of birth to a day, and names of his parents.

THE AUTHOR.

"Oh! she'll find it, in a horn!" he said. "You can bet your life she's a good 'un, but she will hustle one while before she finds her eagle again!"

"I'm not so sure about that," Vidocq replied. "She's a remarkably gifted woman. You'll admit that?"

"Oh! yes. But, how in the world is she to know where I put that coin?"

"You might ask the same in reference to her other wonderful feats. I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll bet you the best box of cigars the town affords that she finds the coin she gave you!"

"You know her, then?"

"No more than do you."

"Very well. I'll take the bet. By the way, it isn't often two of our craft meet under so peculiar circumstances, so I propose we shake hands. My name is Spence Sargent, and of course, thanks to the mademoiselle, I know yours, which makes further introduction unnecessary."

"Right you are. So you are a detective?"

"Yes. But, I'll swear I don't believe that woman knows my name!"

"Don't stake high money on that. Why, how should she size me up when the only name I have been known under, while here, is Vidocq?"

"Dunno. Can't say as for that!"

"That woman certainly takes your time, eh?"

"Well, yes, rather!"

At this juncture Mlle. Leonora reappeared upon the platform.

"Ha! ha!" Spence Sargent said, gleefully, as she approached. "You didn't find the coin, so easily, did you?"

"Oh! yes! no trouble about that. Here it is, now!"

And, reaching quickly forward, she lifted the detective's hat, and the coin rolled off his totally bald cranium, upon the floor!

This was the signal for a combined roar of laughter and applause, while Sargent looked considerably crestfallen and uncomfortable.

"Say, look here!" he ejaculated, picking up the gold-piece, and examining it, "that ain't fair. Some one told you where it was."

"Did any one see you place it under your hat, sir?" Leonora asked.

"Certainly not!"

"Then, who could have told me where it was?"

That settled it. Sargent had no more to say. So he returned the coin to its owner, who, after making an obeisance to the crowd, tripped down the piazza steps and hurried away, followed by a round of applause from the spectators.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DWARF DOUBLE-BLUFFED.

THE reader will remember of an appointed meeting between Charles Covington, and the dwarf, Hero Hicks, at noon of the day which witnessed the events we have last chronicled.

At this interview, Covington was to make known whether or not he would yield up the ten thousand dollars, said by Hicks to be demanded by Stella Sloat de Brown, from her husband, Reginald de Brown, alias Covington.

About the middle of the forenoon, of this same day, after regaling himself with Sockdolager's best "red-eye," Hicks betook his way from one of the lowest saloons in the town toward the tent of Mlle. Leonora.

"It's a great scheme," he mused, as he plodded along—"a scheme not only for monetary gain, but for vengeance. Ah! Reginald, you know little the man you are dealing with! You seem to forget, that, years ago, when you cast me into prison, to shield yourself of a crime, and to aid you in getting the family wealth, you made your own, ill-shaped brother a lifelong enemy!"

"But you did, and the blood that burned bitter in these veins, then, burns a thousandfold more bitter now. True, I have been your veriest slave, since then, but it was only that my blow might be the keenest felt when I was ready to strike! The time is gradually drawing near, when I will be ready for this blow. Sargent is here; Vidocq and old Sloat are here, and Stella is here, not to mention myself. Ah! what a combination—five to one! And so strange, too. Here hated enemies have been living within a stone's throw of each other, without the slightest suspicion of each other's identity!"

"Oh, well, so much the better for me. I cannot complain. As long as I make my boodle, I'm the winnin' boss! Of course I don't want to rob Stella, and ain't goin' to, 'cause after I get my divvy, my beloved brother's ownings will pan out plentifully for the woman and the kid. So it behooves me, as regards myself and the

future moisture of my gullet, to make hay while the sun shines. And here's for the hay!"

By this time he had arrived in the vicinity of Leonora's tent.

The door of the tent was closed, and apparently no one was at home.

"They keep themselves housed up mighty close," the misshapen muttered; "but they're in thar, all the same. I allow I can't get in by the door, 'cause most likely it is locked. Let me see!"

He scratched his bushy head reflectively for a moment, and then, stealing softly forward, lay down close beside the canvas.

For some time he listened attentively, but failed to catch the sound of a human voice within.

He next drew his knife and cut a small slit in the canvas, through which he could gain a view of the interior.

"Aha! there's two compartments, eh?" he muttered; "and the one nearest me is unoccupied. Well, I reckon I'll take possession of it and await developments."

So he suited the action to the word by lifting the bottom of the canvas, and crawled under it into the tent.

Once inside, he comfortably seated himself upon one of the chairs and waited.

He could hear voices beyond the partition, and presumed it would be but a short time ere he would receive a visit from the mademoiselle.

And he was not mistaken.

Within five minutes she made her appearance.

He had his revolver in readiness, and instantly covered her, while she uttered a startled cry of alarm.

"Silence!" he said, sternly. "Come and sit down. I have something of great importance to say to you concerning yourself!"

"Who are you? How dare you, sir, intrude upon my premises?" Leonora gasped.

"Obey me!" Hicks commanded. "I am your friend, as you will find out if you but act sensibly. Come and sit down. If you don't, I'm just the opposite. I want to tell you of Reginald de Brown!"

Leonora started perceptibly at mention of the name; then, after a slight hesitation, came forward and sat down, but not within reach of the repulsive visitor.

"I don't know you, sir, or what you mean!" she said. "If you have any business with me, please explain it at once!"

"It is true you may not know me, Mrs. Estelle Sloat de Brown, but, that makes no particular difference. I know you, and your whole history. You are the wife of Reginald de Brown, who, unfortunately, has the honor of being my own brother. Your father is Silas Sloat, of Perkins's Corners, Vermont, and is now in Sockdolager, looking for you!"

"I am aware of that fact, sir. What of it?"

"A great deal! Are you aware that your husband is looking for you too, with the intention of killing you?"

"I am not."

"Well, such is the case. He has become engaged to a rich heiress, but cannot legally marry her until you are out of the way. He dares not apply for a divorce, because there are officers scouring the country for him, to arrest him on the charge of murder and robbery, to say nothing of forgery. Therefore it is necessary that he should find you, and put you and the kid out of the way!"

"And, I suppose he hired you to do the job, eh?"

"Not by any means! On the contrary, although I have accompanied him in his search, I am secretly his enemy, and have long been so. Of course I have had to stand by him, as a way o' gittin' my grub, but now he and I have had a kick, and I allow the future outlook fer provender aire purty darned slim. That's why I come to you."

"Indeed? Why do you come to me? I have nothing for you?"

"Oh! yes you have. If you ain't got the fodder good and handy, you've got the wherewithal what will buy fodder!"

"So you think to extort money from me, do you, you contemptible wretch!" Leonora cried, sternly.

"There's no extort about it. I'm starvin', and I must have money. You've got loads of it, and it's only fair you divvy up!"

"Certainly not. You are foolish to think I am so silly. You have no claim upon me, whatever!"

"Hain't, eh? Well, you shall see! If I tell you that my beloved brother, Reginald, is in

town looking for you, perhaps you will change your tune a mite!"

"Not at all, sir. I care not whether the man is here, or in Halifax. He is nothing to me!"

"He is your husband!"

"No longer! When he deserted me, years ago, he ceased to be anything to me!"

"But, ye don't understand! He is here in search of you, but knows not where you are. If I was to tell him, that would settle your hash. He's got a gang of heelers with him, and for him to find you would result in your annihilation. So you see, I've got you dead to rights, but, as I don't want to make you any trouble, I thought as how maybe you'd be willing to pay me a little something for it—say a couple hundred dollars or so!"

"Not one dollar, sir. I fear neither you nor Reginald de Brown. I know you are both ruffianly wretches, but, what care I for that? I always go armed, and can take care of myself. So, I order you to leave my tent, and never to come here again. If you do, I shall not hesitate to shoot you!"

"Oh! ye won't, hey?"

"No, I won't! and I want you to get out of this tent, at once!"

"So I heard you say. But, ye see, when it comes to shuttin' two kin play at that game. I've got the drop on you, an' kin kill you as easy as rollin' off a log, and don't ye fergit it; so ye better haul in yer reins, and produce the two hundred dollars. D'ye see?"

"I don't see!" Leonora cried, sternly. "My hand is in my pocket, and clutches a cocked revolver that is so leveled it covers your heart, precisely. I'll give you just five seconds to leave this tent, or you're a dead man!"

Now, be it known, Hicks was an arrant coward, and the stern ring of Leonora's voice warned him that it was best to "git," for his own weapon was not cocked.

So he arose.

"All right," he said. "I'll cave, 'cause et aire ag'in' my grain to kill a person, much less a woman. But I'll have my revenge for this, see if I don't. My vengeful brother shall know of this within the hour, and as soon as he knows where you are, I wouldn't give the price of a bullet for your life. So remember what I have told you; I never lie!"

Then, turning, he dove under the edge of the canvas, and was gone.

An hour later, he stood in the presence of Charles Covington, in that individual's neatly furnished sitting-room.

Covington was seated at a table, engaged in writing, and looked up with a scowl.

"Well, what do you want?" he growled.

"I reckon you orter know! I've come for the money for Stella, your wife, 'cordin' to 'p'intment! Am I to get it, or not?"

"Oh! I suppose I might as well settle with her!" the villain replied, surlily. "Sit down there"—indicating a chair, at about the center of the room—"and wait till I finish writing!"

Hicks obeyed, a gleam of triumph in his eyes. Ten thousand dollars!

Was he really to be given the custody of this handsome sum?

If so, how quick then would he leave town, and laugh at the success of his plot!

Covington wrote away for several minutes, and then once more looked up.

"Well, are you ready to go?" he demanded.

"Yas, when I git the mozey!" Hicks replied.

"All right! then go!" Covington said, with a grim laugh.

As he spoke, a section of the floor where Hicks was seated, shot downward, taking the ruffianly schemer out of sight.

He had been trapped!

CHAPTER XIII. MURDER.

THE morning following the night of Leonora's wonderful exhibition upon the veranda of the Sandy Bar Hotel, brought to the people of Sockdolager two surprises of unusual magnitude.

A genuine murder had never as yet been committed in the camp, but the early risers this morning made the discovery that what, in all probability were two murders, had been committed during the night.

In the first instance, the body of the giant chief of the so-styled Executive Committee, was found in the street, stark and stiff in death.

The job had been plainly accomplished with a knife, for the throat was pierced.

There were no signs of a struggle near where the body was found, which rendered the matter all the more mysterious.

The second body found was in the rear of the hotel, and proved to be that of the stranger de-

tective, who had sat upon the piazza during the performance of Mlle. Lenora the night before.

He had been shot through the temple, and evidently had been dead several hours.

It was Vidocq who made this discovery.

He had risen early, and was on his way to the stable to get a horse for a morning gallop when he stumbled over the corpse.

He was greatly surprised, and, before giving alarm, he knelt down and made an examination of the body.

The wound had evidently been inflicted by a forty-four caliber, and death must have been instantaneous.

The crime could not have been committed for money, for the dead man's pocketbook and watch and chain had been left untouched.

Among other things, Vidocq found something that caused him considerable surprise, and which he concluded to appropriate.

It was a warrant issued in San Francisco for the arrest of Reginald de Brown for the murder of one Michael Skeen.

Together with the warrant was a photo of the wanted man.

"By Jove! this is a find," Dick muttered, "and as this poor fellow is dead, I reckon I'll keep the document. I may have occasion to run across this De Brown. Let me see: it was Reginald de Brown who eloped with Sloat's daughter. I'll show this photograph to the old man and see if he'll recognize it."

He pocketed the two articles and then gave the alarm.

In the mean time the body of the Executive Committee chief had been found, and when it came to be generally known that two murders had been committed, the greatest excitement prevailed.

People gathered in knots in the saloons and upon the street, and discussed the situation.

Who had killed the two men?

Here was the question.

Had they been slain by different parties or by one and the same assassin?

Here was a mystery for which there was no solution. No clues could be found leading to an explanation of the strange affair. The murderer or murderers had done the bloody work quietly and surely.

The bodies were removed to a vacant tent, and gentle hands prepared them for burial. This was all that could be done.

Neither had any relatives in the camp.

The Executive Committee were especially incensed over the loss of their leader, and threatened dire vengeance on the head of the murderer should he be found.

As for Vidocq, he was not a little puzzled over the sudden ending of his brother detective's career.

"The fellow came from 'Frisco!" he mused, as he lounged about the hotel, "and was clearly a stranger here. It would not appear that he had been in the town long enough to have made an enemy, and yet only an enemy would have murdered him. It could not have been a suicide, for no weapons were found in the vicinity, nor can I think of any clues."

"Let me see. He came to Sockdolager a stranger, but armed with a warrant for the arrest of Reginald de Brown. Does that signify that De Brown is here in camp? If so, it but stands to reason that he is the man who committed at least one of the murders!"

He took the photograph from his pocket, and examined it with more minuteness than before.

It was the face and shoulders of a man of some thirty-five or thirty-six years of age. The face was a bold one, and inclined to be handsome, being destitute of any beard, and lit up by large, pleasant eyes. The hair was evidently of very light color.

"It's the face of a man of more than ordinary intelligence," Vidocq decided—"of such a person as would be successful in roguery, even though there is little to see that bespeaks a vicious disposition. I wish Sloat was here to see the picture!"

But Uncle Si wasn't, nor had Vidocq seen anything of him since the previous day. He thought nothing strange about it, however, presuming the old Vermonter was at Covington's house.

It was a feverish day in Sockdolager, owing to the excitement over the murders, but gradually the day grew to a close, and the two bodies received a respectable burial, although the coffins were but rough boxes.

Just at evening Charles Covington made his appearance upon the street. He was neatly dressed, and his sweeping beard shone glossily.

He sauntered along leisurely, twirling his cane, and evidently was out for an airing.

What struck Vidocq as strange, however, was that Uncle Si was not with him.

"I don't see into that nohow!" the detective thought, a feeling of anxiety for the first time stealing over him. "I supposed all the time Sloat was at Covington's, but this don't look like it. I don't believe Covington would come for a walk alone, and leave the old man at the house, unless the old fellow is laid out stiff drunk. I must inquire into this."

So when Covington came up the piazza steps, Vidocq approached him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but are you Mr. Covington?"

"I am," was the reply. "What of it?"

"I wished to ask you if my friend, Mr. Sloat, is at your house, sir?"

"He is not!"

"Not! Why, I was almost positive he was. He did not return to the hotel last night, but I felt no anxiety about him, supposing he was stopping over with you. I wonder what can have become of him?"

"Don't know anything about it, sir!" was the surly answer. "If you're particularly interested in the old chap, better go look for him. You'll probably find him drunk in some saloon!" And the would-be nabob strode on into the hotel, leaving the detective staring after him, in surprise.

"Well! well! if that wasn't rather cheeky, I'll lo e my bet!" Vidocq mused. "Short and sour as a pickle. So, that's the style of a chap you are, hey? Well, upon my word, I don't see how old Si took a notion to you. You and I wouldn't cotton together worth a cent, I'm a-thinkin', Mister Covington Chaley."

"And so old Si ain't over at your house, eh? Where in thunder can he be, then? That's what I can't understand."

He set forth at once on a tour of inquiry, and visited every rum-hole in the town, not so much because of Covington's remark as to satisfy his own convictions that Sloat had not been on a "tear."

Inquiry at all points brought the same answer: "Have not seen anything of such a person!"

And so, finally, nothing was left for Vidocq but to return to the hotel, without having succeeded in his quest.

What had become of the Vermonter, was a great puzzle to him, and one that gave him much anxiety.

Had the old man, too, fallen the victim of foul play? or had some accident befallen him that had caused his death?

Perhaps he had fallen down the shaft of a mine?

But, that was hardly probable, as the mouths to the mines were pretty well guarded.

That he had not suddenly left town Vidocq was well satisfied, for he still held in his possession, the old man's pocketbook, now lighter the five hundred dollars paid the woman of mystery.

The old man was gone, but how, where or when?

CHAPTER XIV.

COVINGTON ADVISES.

WHEN Vidocq got back to the hotel, he was both discouraged and out of patience.

The hour was rather late, but, late as it was, he sat down on the piazza, lit a cigar, and gave himself up to serious thought.

Only two other people, besides himself, were on the piazza, and one of these was Charles Covington.

The other was a stout, heavy-set man, black-haired and bewhiskered, ill-expressed of countenance. He had the physique of a person who might possess prodigious strength, and was dressed in the rough garb of a miner.

He and Covington were seated close together and engaged in low conversation.

Although Vidocq could see them, he could not catch the least part of their conversation, but several times noticed gestures that gave him to understand they were talking about him.

Finally, after full half an hour's talk, the burly man arose and leaving the piazza, went down the street.

Soon afterward, Covington arose, and sauntered over to where Vidocq was seated.

"Well, young man, have you found the old man, yet?" he asked.

"I have not!" Vidocq replied.

"Haven't, eh? Rather singular, isn't it, that he should so suddenly disappear?"

"Very!" Vidocq answered, briefly.

"Yes! yes! very singular. Suppose you have no idea where he has gone to?"

"No, not at present."

"Oh! well, I wouldn't fret about it. Very likely he has wandered off somewhere, and will turn up again, soon. By the way, young man, I heard considerable talk about you, and would like you to answer me a question. What brought you here to Sockdolager?"

"The stage-coach!"

"No! no! I don't mean that. What business have you got here?"

"As much business as any one else, I reckon!"

Vidocq declared, nonchalantly.

Covington scowled, angrily.

"It don't always pay to be too facetious, young man!" he said. "I want a civil answer to my question, sir."

"And I decline to give it. I don't consider it anybody's business *what* I am here for!"

"We shall see about that. I represent this town in the capacity of mayor, and it is my duty to look into matters of a suspicious nature. The man you saw talking with me is Jake Peel, the new chief of the Regulators. He tells me you're a hard character, and that you are the famous road-agent, Deadwood Dick. What have you to say to that, now?"

"Nothing particularly, either one way or another," was the reply. "As long as I mind my own business it's nobody's business who I am."

"But, it is, though! If you're a character of that sort, we don't want you around this camp. You came here and set yourself up as a bravo, and besides several quarrels, you openly defied the authority of the Vigilance Committee, and bluffed them off!"

Vidocq laughed, lightly.

"That's nothing!" he retorted. "A pack of coyotes could do that. These men who set themselves up to be the Executive Committee, I can lick any six of 'em single handed!"

"You'll have to do it, I guess. They've got a grudge against you, and they'll take it out, too, mark my words. They allow it was you who killed Elephant Eph, and they're goin' to avenge him. So, if you know when you're well off, you'll slide out o' town while you have the opportunity. I give you this as a friendly tip, for Jake Peel told me what were their intentions, and when he has an object in view he carries it out, at all hazards!"

"A fig for your tips!" Vidocq returned. "I shall not leave this place, until I get good and ready, and there are not enough people in the camp to make me go. So your advice is both unsought and uncalled for!"

"Very well, sir. Have your own way if it suits you, but, if you're determined to be as stubborn as a mule, I hope they do go for you!" and the man turned away.

"All right!" Vidocq called out. "If you had only expressed that wish in the first place, you'd have saved a lot of breath!"

Covington made no reply, but passed down the steps and hurried away.

As he took his departure, a handkerchief dropped from his pocket, and fell upon the floor.

Under any other circumstances, Vidocq would have called his attention to the loss; but, he had taken a positive dislike to Covington, and some impulse he could not have explained, caused him to let the man pass on without recovering his property.

When he was out of sight Vidocq picked up the rag and examined it.

It was certainly an old-timer, but in its better days had been a fine article of imported silk. In the center some deft hand had worked in colored silk the symbol of two clasped hands, with a dove hovering above them.

The color of the silk thread used in this work was yet quite distinct.

"An odd handkerchief," Vidocq commented, "and no doubt highly prized by its owner. It would seem, by this, that Covington must have married at some previous period of his existence; or, mayhap, this was a present from a sweetheart. Well, I'll freeze to it, at least, until the owner comes looking after it," and putting it in his pocket he thought no more about it for the time being.

Soon after he retired for the night.

But he got little sleep, through wondering what had become of old Si.

That foul play had befallen him now seemed as good as settled. But, how and where?

Vidocq finally wearied of puzzling his brain over the matter, and dropped asleep.

He arose early, and, securing a horse, took a brisk gallop down the gulch for several miles, feeling greatly exhilarated on his return for breakfast.

After breakfast he found a note waiting for him at the hotel office.

It was inclosed in a small envelope, and directed in a woman's hand.

"Well! I wonder what *this* means?" Vidocq silently soliloquized. "I was not aware that I had any female correspondents in this town."

With considerable eagerness he tore away the envelope and spread the sheet out before him.

This is what he read:

"DEADWOOD DICK, SIR:—

"I wish to see you on a matter of great importance. But, *not* at the tent. Come up the gulch, to where the sign-board is. You will find me there."

"Mlle. Leonora!"

Vidocq could but give vent to a whistle of astonishment as he read this.

"Wants to see me, eh?" he muttered. "I wonder what for? Does she want to confess that she is Stella? I don't know of any other reason. Or, maybe, I am in her way, and she wants to put me out! Well, I'll go, at all hazards, and be on my guard!"

He brushed up a little, and then set forth on his journey, afoot, the distance not being great, and he did not wish to attract any unnecessary attention to his movements.

It was a bracing morning, and being a good walker, he covered space rapidly.

In three-quarters of an hour he came in sight of the sign-board which contained the Executive Committee's manifesto, but, there was no sign of human presence in the immediate vicinity.

The locality was sparsely timbered, the principal wood being bunches of knotted chaparral.

When he reached the sign-board, Vidocq paused and looked keenly about him, but no sign of Leonora did he see.

Even then he was unsuspecting of treachery, for he leaned carelessly against a tree, and proceeded to light a cigar.

Fatal action!

The next instant he received a blow beside the head that felled him to the ground, and, ere he could arise, he was pounced upon by a dozen men, who leaped from a thicket near at hand.

He struggled with the desperation of a madman, to fight them off, but all to no use.

By superiority of numbers, alone, they overpowered him, and bound him, hand and foot.

Then, he realized how easily he had been fooled.

The letter had not come from Leonora, at all.

Charles Covington had spoken truly; he was now in the power and at the mercy of his enemies, the Executive Committee!

They stood around and glowered down at him, with veriest triumph.

CHAPTER XV.

LEONORA GIVES IN.

FOR a few seconds, Vidocq, or as we shall hereafter call him, Deadwood Dick, was too mad for utterance.

His was one of those sensitive natures, that he would much rather be half-killed in a square and fair fight, than have any one get advantage of him by an act of mean cunning or treachery.

And this very thing the Executive Committee had done.

He had fallen right into the trap they had set for him, and really had no one to blame for it but himself.

"Waal, me bucko, how do you find yourself?" one of the gang demanded, leaning over the fallen detective. "Kinder took ye unexpected, didn't we? Didn't find so much gal beer as ye thought ye would, did yer?"

Dick's lips remained sealed, but his gleaming eyes spoke volumes of defiance.

"Obol ye won't talk, hey? Waal, ye needn't. We can do all the chin-music thar's needed for this eventful occasion, you bet! Ye see, we was bound to hev ye anyhow. Et war decreed by fate that you should appear before our tribunal, and amuse us by some feats on the tight-rope. We tried to persuade you to come into our fold, in ther usual manner, but you was too gentle and lamb-like ter obey, and so we had to resort to a leetle strategy, similar to that which the spider worked on the fly."

"Oh! I tell you the new captain has a great head on him fer plannin', an' when he arrives, we're goin' ter have sum fun wi' ye, you bet—ain't that so, me larkies?"

There was a guttural murmur of assent.

"What's ther use o' waitin' for the capt'in?" growled one of the committee. "Why not string the feller up, ter onc't, and have done wi' it?"

"Not much, Mister Sandy Jim! Ther capt'in sed ther galoot war to hev a fair trial before he war gi'n his send-off, an' the capt'in is boss. What he sez goes, an' no proceedin's can proceed till the capt'in comes. You heer me!"

"Pshaw! He may not come till noon," growled another. "Who wants ter hang 'round heer, dry as a grounded fish? Ef any one hed any rat poison et wouldn't be so monotonous!"

"Waal, I'm jest ther pilgrim as carries a little o' thet same when I go to er necktie-party, you gamble on it!" the first declared; "but thar don't happen ter be enuff ter go ther rounds o' ther gang. There's jest a nice three-fingers for all 'cept three of us. Let the dryest men o' the party hold up a hand."

Every man of the gang reared a brawny fist instantly.

"Hello! Every one o' ye is the dryest, hey?" observed the first speaker, with a shake of the head. "That won't do—no, siree! sure's my name is Pipes! Thar's suthin' else got to be did. Lemme see. Ah! I have it: Let's lash the prisoner to the big tree yonder, so there's no danger o' his wigglin' away, an' then set down an' play the keerds to see which three uv us stays out in ther cold."

This proposition was immediately greeted with approval, for it was fair in its way, and the game had life enough in it to make it interesting.

No time was lost in getting ready. Each man's mouth watered for the first pull out of that precious bottle, and the delay of Captain Jake Peel in arriving upon the scene was for the time forgotten.

Deadwood Dick was lifted and lashed firmly to a large tree which grew near at hand. Then, equipped with cards, the twelve ruffians sat down upon the grass, a dozen yards away, to gamble for the whisky.

Dick paid little or no attention to them, for his mind was too busied in cogitating over the problem of what was to become of him.

Would they really lynch him?

That seemed to be their intention as soon as the new captain arrived, and, if such was their intention, what was to prevent them accomplishing it?

Dick was thoroughly helpless, and unable to defend himself. Nor was there any person in or near Sockdolager who was likely to come to his rescue.

Most discouraging, to be sure, was the outlook; yet, when he came to remember the many miraculous escapes of his past career, it brought him a faint ray of hope.

The game of cards for the whisky was waging hot and heavy, and so excited were the players that they paid no attention to their prisoner.

Dick was silently remarking this fact when he was startled by a whisper, close to his right ear:

"Sh! I am going to cut you free, and then we will steal into the chaparral, and thence to a cave, of which no one knows but myself."

Dick made a movement of the head, to indicate that he heard, and at the same time watched the committee, fearful lest they might look his way before he could be released.

But by far too interested were they in the game to think of him.

One by one the ropes fell off, until he stood a free man.

Then he turned and saw a woman's figure retreating toward the chaparral, keeping the big tree body between her and the gang.

He recognized in an instant who it was.

It was Leonora!

When she had disappeared he followed as stealthily as a cat, and quickly reached cover, when both pushing on through the dense thicket without leaving a trail, entered a small cave, whose entrance this chaparral hid.

"There! we're safe for the present," Leonora announced. "They do not know of the existence of this place, and will not look for it, for I have hidden two of their horses, and they will think we escaped by them!"

"And, mademoiselle, I owe you my life!" Dick said, gratefully. "How can I ever reward you for your bravery?"

"No reward is wanted, sir. I felt you were in trouble—at least I dreamed so, last night—and when I saw you come this way, and knowing those men had preceded you, earlier in the morning, I foresaw trouble and followed you, with the result you have seen. I thought I was on a wild-goose chase at first, but, fortunately for you, I was not!"

"Do you know what brought me out here?"

"How should I?"

"Well, read that and you will find out."

He handed her the note he had received, and she perused it.

"Humph!" she said. "A very clever trick to draw you into a trap, I should say!"

They conversed for some time, and then Dick said:

"Ma'm'selle, why did you not acknowledge your identity to your father, when he and I visited your tent in regard to the claim?"

"My identity? My father?"

"Exactly! It is useless for you to feign surprise, for you were once Stella Sloat, before you ran away with De Brown, and you are still good, honest old Silas Sloat's daughter. The old man has come all the way from the homestead to find and take home his child. We came here to test you, in our search, but, although your actions did not altogether deceive me, you completely deceived Uncle Si, for he said after we left you: 'No, no, sir! that's not my child—Stella would be no such a woman o' stone as that. Our Stella war a kind-hearted gal, an' d'ye s'pose she could sit thar an' hear her old father tell about the old farm, an' of Betsy, an' sech things—sit thar an' never flinch? No, sir! our girl would jest blubber right out, she would!' And all I could say could not change his opinion!"

Dick paused here.

Leonora's face was buried in her handkerchief, and she was weeping.

"Oh! I've done a wicked, wicked thing!—I see it, now," she sobbed—"now, when it is too late. He will never forgive me now!"

"Certainly he will. It would make him ten years younger to clasp you to his breast. I can assure you of that. But, tell me the cause of your strange action, when we visited you?"

"Well, as I see I am unmasked, I will explain. It nearly killed me to pass through that ordeal. I expected his coming, because I saw him at the concert-hall, and so I steeled myself for the occasion. When I saw him first, I knew he had come to take me home, and felt glad of it. But, when I came to consider how the people would talk and act, my heart grew sick within me. They would say: she ran away and lived in high style for awhile; then her husband left her, and now she's come home with her child, to live on the old folks."

"No! said I, I can never stand the mortification of the talk there will be, and so I will steel my heart against affection and live on this miserable existence until death."

"Besides false pride, I had another thing to keep me away from home. When De Brown left me and my babe, in the dead of winter, at the mercy of the world, a pauper, I swore if God was kind enough to keep me through, until I could find him, I'd have my revenge. There is a warrant out for his arrest for murder. I was to have received it yesterday, from the unfortunate detective who was murdered, but, nothing of the document could be found. With this, I intended to set out in search of De Brown, and when I found him to make him give up every penny of his wealth or send him to the scaffold. Now, I shall have to wait until I can get a new warrant from San Francisco."

"You will not have to send to Frisco. I hold the original warrant in my possession, and if you wish, I will assist you to find De Brown. I am beginning to form a pretty fair sized idea that he ain't far away from Sockdolager!"

"Ah! no; he isn't around there. If he had been, I should have seen and recognized him!"

"Not necessarily so. He could, and most likely would, travel under a disguise and a-bark!"

During the foregoing conversation, there had been no sounds of alarm, outside the cave, but the air was now filled with wild cries of defeat and shouts of protanity, these presently being supplemented by the clatter of horses' feet.

Dick crept out to reconnoiter, and on his return, reported that the ruffians were riding away toward Sockdolager, at breakneck speed.

A consultation was then held, and it was decided that it would not be advisable to return to Sockdolager until under the cover of night-fall.

During the day they chatted together of each other's eventful experiences, and, among other things, Dick spoke of Uncle Si's mysterious disappearance, but assured Leonora that he would surely find him, unless the world had opened up and swallowed him.

Leonora also concluded to wear her mask, for a while yet, at least.

About dusk, after Dick had donned a rough disguise, which Leonora had provided for him, the two set out for the town.

CHAPTER XVI.

PROOFS.

WHEN they reached town, Leonora got little Fern at a house where she had left her, and then mother and daughter went on to their tent, while Dick, in his rough disguise, which was a

really clever one, ventured onto the main street.

It was rather a risky thing to do, for he was at once spotted as a stranger; but, owing to his rough dress, little attention was paid to him.

The camp was in a state of commotion, due to the fact that a report had gone out that the author of yesterday's two tragedies had been found to be Deadwood Dick, who had been captured, but had mysteriously made his escape.

Charles Covington had caused several posters to be put out, on which he personally promised to give five hundred dollars for the capture of Deadwood Dick, dead or alive.

"Go it lemons!" the wanted man reflected, after reading one of the notices, "but don't pull out any of your five-hundred notes till you get me! Look out I don't get you before you do me. I've got a terrible thinking in my head about you, Mister Covington Charley, and I'm more'n half sure that I'm right. It crops out purty evident to me now, that you're back of that letter-decoy business, because you're educated, an' the rest of the gang ain't. Then, too, if you're willing to invest five hundred dollars for my capture, dead or alive, you must want me dead mighty bad. But, why? What crime have I ever committed against you that should make you so much my enemy? None at all. Hence, you must have some hidden purpose in this; or must have some object—some powerful motive. You must fear me, because I am in your way. If so, why? I know nothing about your affairs. You have known me to be, without a doubt, employed by Uncle Si Sloat. Uncle Si has mysteriously disappeared. You know it. I know it. Uncle Si had no money with him, or he might have flashed it and dazzled your eyes. In that case you might have made a move for money. But, may there not be something greater than this? It may be—but, let's see: ah! I have it. It's a possibility—a bare possibility, that—that a certain Mr. Charles Covington is some one else!"

Thus ran the thoughts of the detective, as he sauntered about, and carelessly observed each person he met.

The result of what he saw and met is scarcely worth mentioning.

In disguise, Dick registered at the Sandy Bar as John Swath, and treated every one in the room. Then, as an idea occurred to him, he repaired to the tent of Mlle. Leonora, who greeted him with a pleasant welcome, as did little Fern, who quickly saw through the disguise.

"Mrs. Covington—" began Dick.

"Mrs. Covington?"

"Exactly! I think you are the wife of Charles Covington, of this place?"

"What! the wife of *that* man? Never! he came to this place once, and I invited him to leave—w-ich he did!"

"Did you not discover in this man some resemblance of your husband?"

"None, whatever?"

"Then do you recognize *this* face?" and Dick handed her the photo he had procured from the pocket of the San Francisco detective.

One cry, then came the answer:

"It's Reginald!"

"Just so!" assured Richard. "Now, study it closely, and tell me: Do you not discover in that face something which you can see in the face of this Charles Covington?"

Leonora was silent a moment.

"No!" she said, tersely.

"I can!" the detective assured. "But, to put this case aside, did you ever see a handkerchief like this?"

Another cry, as she reached forth, seized, it and held it before her.

"Mine! mine!" she cried. "I gave it to Reginald, and did the fancy work on it myself. For Heaven's sake where did you get this?"

"Sure it is yours?"

"Yes, very sure, I know it is!"

"You gave it to your husband?"

"Yes. He bought it, and I finished it, and we pledged our oath of constancy upon it, when we were married!"

"Then, naturally, though a sinner now, he would not care to part with a token so precious?"

"No, I—I don't think so."

"There is where I think you are right. The man who dropped this is to my mind your husband in disguise. I have all right now, I think. Your husband is Charles Covington, of this place. Now, will you lead, while I follow?"

"No; you must lead."

"You want his money rather than his incarceration and punishment, I infer?"

"A hundred thousand times yes. He deserves to hang, but if he does, I am undone!"

"Significant enough. Now, write and send him a note, saying that, through the planets, or some other blamed thing, you have become possessor of a valuable piece of information which he should be desirous of obtaining, and requesting that he call here at prompt midnight to-night. At the time he calls, come he alone, or with many, I will be behind the adjoining partition. Then, unmask yourself, and make your demands! If he refuses, I will be at hand. I will now go forth in search of your father. When I return I will enter, under the canvas, into the inside compartment. But, don't you come near it, nor the child. Both remain here, while I am gone!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END.

DEADWOOD DICK then left the tent.

Of course, as he was disguised, no one recognized him, but in his wanderings he thoroughly equipped himself with all he expected to need.

In passing across the gulch, in the darkness, for it had clouded over and there was no moon, he heard a groan, and found the object of suffering in the person of Hero Hicks, the dwarf.

Lying alongside a pile of brush, he was a pitiful object to behold. His head was battered, one arm was hanging limp, and one leg was dislocated, all of which Dick discovered upon examination.

He was still conscious, however, and in reply to Dick's questions, he said:

"Leave me alone; I've got to die. But, avenge me. Go to Charles Covington and demand the old man who was a prisoner in the cellar. Rescue him. I could not. Take him to Leonora; she is his daughter. Send Covington to where he belongs, to Satan. I am his brother, and my name is Hero de Brown. Covington's real name is Reginald de Brown, and he is one of the worst rascals ever born. He is a thief, forger and murderer. He murdered Michael Skeen in San Francisco. Say—ah! hold on—ah! tell Stella to—t—t—for—"

The last sentence was never spoken.

Hicks was dead before it could be finished.

Two miners came along just then, and Dick paid them to take the body to some place of shelter, until it could be better cared for. He then locked to his revolvers, and made his way to the Covington residence.

He remained in the vicinity for a few minutes, hoping to discover that the proprietor was not at home, and soon was pleased to observe Covington come forth and start off up the one street.

Dick then promptly went to the back door, and forced it open by sheer pressure. Once inside he explored the house from cellar to garret, but found not "hide or hair" of Uncle Si.

Then, he began a closer examination.

Entering the pantry, and shoving aside what was in reality a common dresser, an opening was revealed leading to a side cellar, which was reached by descending a steep flight of stairs, walled in on either side by heavy blocks of stone.

At the foot of these stairs was an iron-slatted door, secured by a padlock.

Peering through into the innermost recesses of the tomb-like vault, Dick could see nothing; but, on calling "Uncle Si!" that individual came hobbling forward.

"By the great Jehosephat, boy, is that you?" he demanded. "Fer heving's sake let me out!"

"All right! Keep quiet, pop!" Dick replied, gently. "I've got a surprise for you, when I get you out of here!"

"A s'prise. Sho! ye don't say! 'Tain't the gal!"

"Yes, it's the gal! But, you must go according to instructions!"

"On course I will! If I'd only 'a' done it, first, I wouldn't be here, now!"

"Do you know who your friend, Covington is?" Dick asked, as he began an attempt to force the lock open.

"All he told me was that he was a bad man, and if I'd gave him a deed to the old farm, he'd let me off soon as he got a chance to sell the farm, but unless I'd do it, here I was to stay until I rotted."

"Well, that nice man, Covington, is your estimable son-in-law!" Dick said, unlocking the door, "and if you're a bit spry, I'll give you a chance to see him. He will soon be in the power of one less merciful than the law."

It did not them long to get out of the house, and they made for Leonora's tent, gaining entrance as Dick had indicated.

The old man was fairly boiling over with ex-

citement, at the prospect of meeting his long-lost child, but, Dick managed to keep him quiet.

Promptly at twelve o'clock there came a knock upon the door of the tent, and Covington was ushered in and pointed to a seat, little Fern being the usher.

"Ah! ahem—" Covington began, not seeing the woman of mystery; "is not ma'm'selle at home, pet?"

"No! mamma is at not at home," replied Fern, acting the part which had been taught her. "Perhaps you can find her at Prairie Du Chien, where you deserted us!"

"No! the gal is not at home!" roared Old Si, bursting away from Dick, and bolting out into the other apartment like a catapult, "but the old man's byer, ye gol-durn, lop-eared, dirty rascal—the old man's heer!" and in a moment Uncle Si, chair and Covington were soon a mixed-up mass upon the floor.

By vigorous exertion Dick rolled the old man to one side, and clapped a pair of handcuffs upon the wrists of Covington.

"Curse you, you fiend, what do you mean by this insult?" the prisoner fumed. "Release me, or I'll cry for aid!"

"If you do it will be your death-yelp!" the detective assured. "Reginald de Brown, by virtue of warrant and power vested in me as a United States detective, I arrest you for the murder of Michael Skeen, in San Francisco!"

"I—I—my name is not Reginald de Brown!" gasped the villain. "Ha! my God!"

For just then, with mask removed, revealing a face of rare loveliness even though stern it was, the mademoiselle entered, leading Fern by the hand.

"Tear that false beard away!" she commanded of Dick, and it was no quicker said than done.

A far different face was revealed—a far more villainous one.

"So you say you are not Reginald de Brown?" Leonora cried sternly, as she faced him with blazing eyes. "No; you are not! Your own mother would deny she ever gave birth to such an imp of Satan! Yet, again, you are Reginald de Brown—my husband, and the father of my child, both of whom you deserted in the dead of winter, and left to the world's cold mercy. Yet with courage far greater than my strength, I struggled through a life of want and hardship, praying that the time might come when I might make you suffer half what I have suffered. Wretch of wretches, that time has come! I have you facing the gallows, and can save or convict you. Which do you want?"

"For God's sake, spare me! I know I have sinned, but life is dear to me yet. Name your terms and they shall be accepted."

"How much money have you got? I know, yet would prefer to have you answer."

"Everything I have in the world has been converted into money, except some mining lands that are mortgaged beyond their value. Everything is in my safe—some four hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

"Very well. Detective, fix his hands so that they will not be noticed as being manacled, and we will proceed to his house to verify this statement. I guess no one will be abroad at this hour."

In a few minutes the rather strange procession was *en route*, Stella walking arm-in-arm with her father, the old man as happy as a school-boy.

The residence reached and entered, De Brown's hands were released long enough to open his big safe.

Stella and her father then proceeded to count over the money, Dick keeping charge of the prisoner, a revolver in his hand ready for instant use.

"Great Scott, Stella, if you get all this money, you'll be more than able to buy out all o' Perkins's Cross Roads!" Uncle Si said, wiping away the perspiration. "What on 'arth be ye goin' to do wi' all this stuff?"

"Back to the Cross Roads I am going, to take care of the parents who loved me even in my wrong-doing!" was the sad reply.

The money was nearly all bills of very large denomination, and consequently was readily portable; so a bag was brought into requisition, and the load of wealth stuffed into it.

Sadly enough, De Brown saw his big fortune floating away from him, but he kept his nerve and said nothing. Better that than hang!

When all was ready for departure, Deadwood Dick turned to the prisoner.

"De Brown," he said, "I still have the power to take you for murder, but, owing to my respect for your wife and her father, I will violate

one of my duties, and allow you now to depart. But, mind you, go far, for if I ever catch you in a Western Territory again I shall have you!"

"Yes! I shall go far!" was the abstracted answer, as the three passed out.

At daybreak the next morning a new sensation stirred the "city"—that of a fire. The Covington mansion was consumed by fire, and nowhere was Covington to be found. It was generally believed that he had perished in the flames, but, that morning, a troop of miners came in bearing his dead body, which had been found near a deserted shaft. He evidently had shot himself and attempted to crawl to the shaft as if to precipitate himself into its depths, but died ere he reached it. In his pocket, strangely enough, was found a memorandum-book or diary containing a complete record of all his crimes—giving dates and names; and then the people of Sockdolager City learned the real character of their "first citizen." Among the last entries were these:

10th. Killed Elephant Ebb. Afraid of him. He knew too much.

"Doctored the Dwarf for his insolence.

11th. Settled with the 'Frisco detective.

12th. Set the hounds on Deadwood Dick. If they don't finish him, I must. He is a bad man for me.

In the midst of the hubbub, Deadwood Dick, Jr., Old Si, Stella and little Fern came out on the piazza of the hotel, and Dick, addressing the crowd, told the story of De Brown and his own efforts to hunt for the wronged wife. Uncle Si supplemented it by his own statement. All present then first fully understood all that had happened, and the little party quite became the "heroes of the hour."

No mention, of course, was made of the previous night's proceedings in the Covington residence, so all supposed the wealth of the villain had perished in the flames—if wealth he really possessed.

That afternoon Uncle Si, Stella and little Fern left Sockdolager City—so full of painful memories for them—*en route* for Vermont and the dear old home, where they arrived in due time, and Stella and the lovely child quickly became reconciled to their new surroundings. All was indeed forgiven, and Old Si and Betsy seemed to grow younger every day in the blessed love-light which now filled the house.

May they live many years to enjoy their blessings.

As for Richard Bristol, he did not tarry long, after his friends left for the East, but disappeared as suddenly as he had come, and Sockdolager City knew him no more.

THE END.

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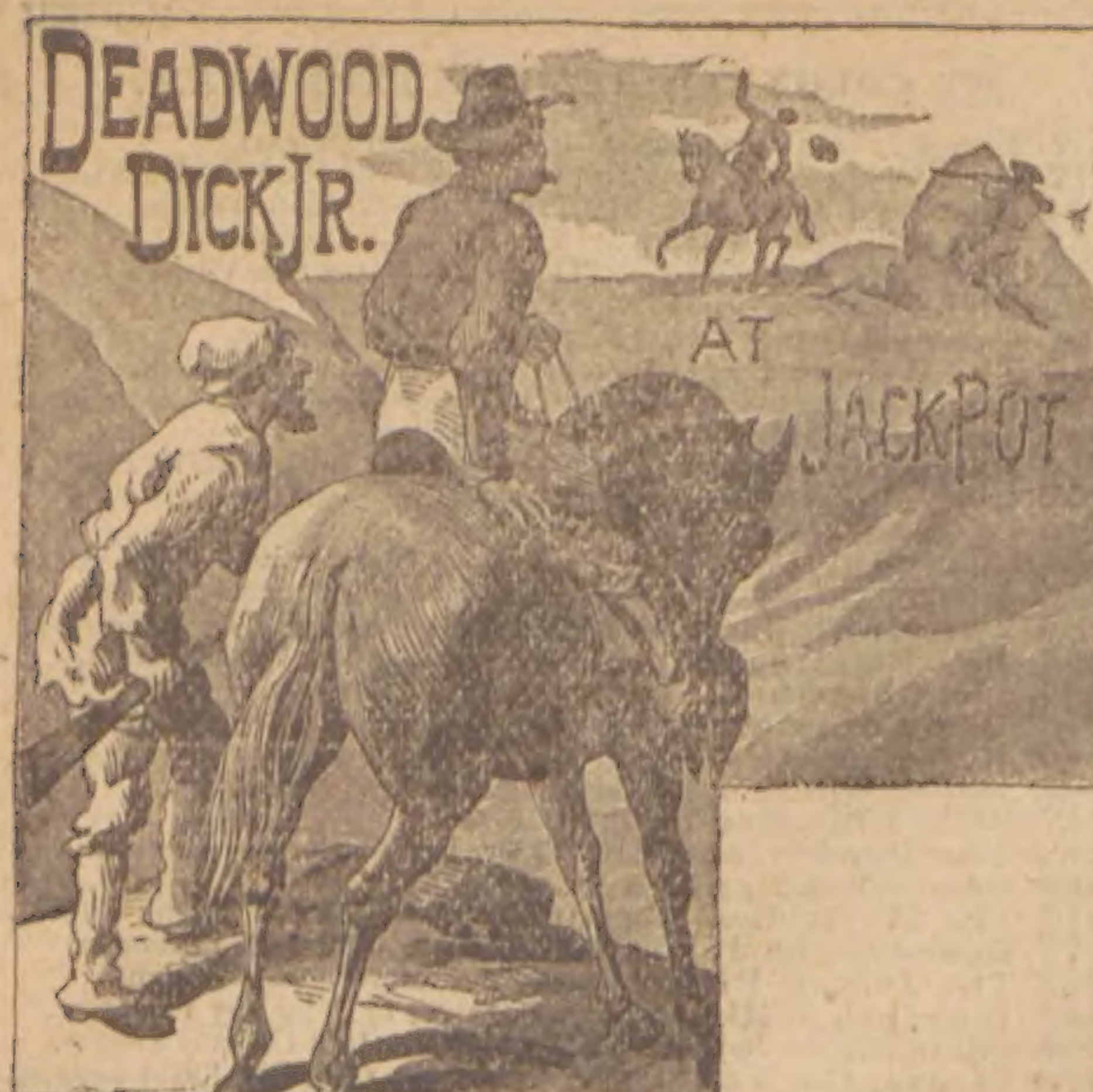
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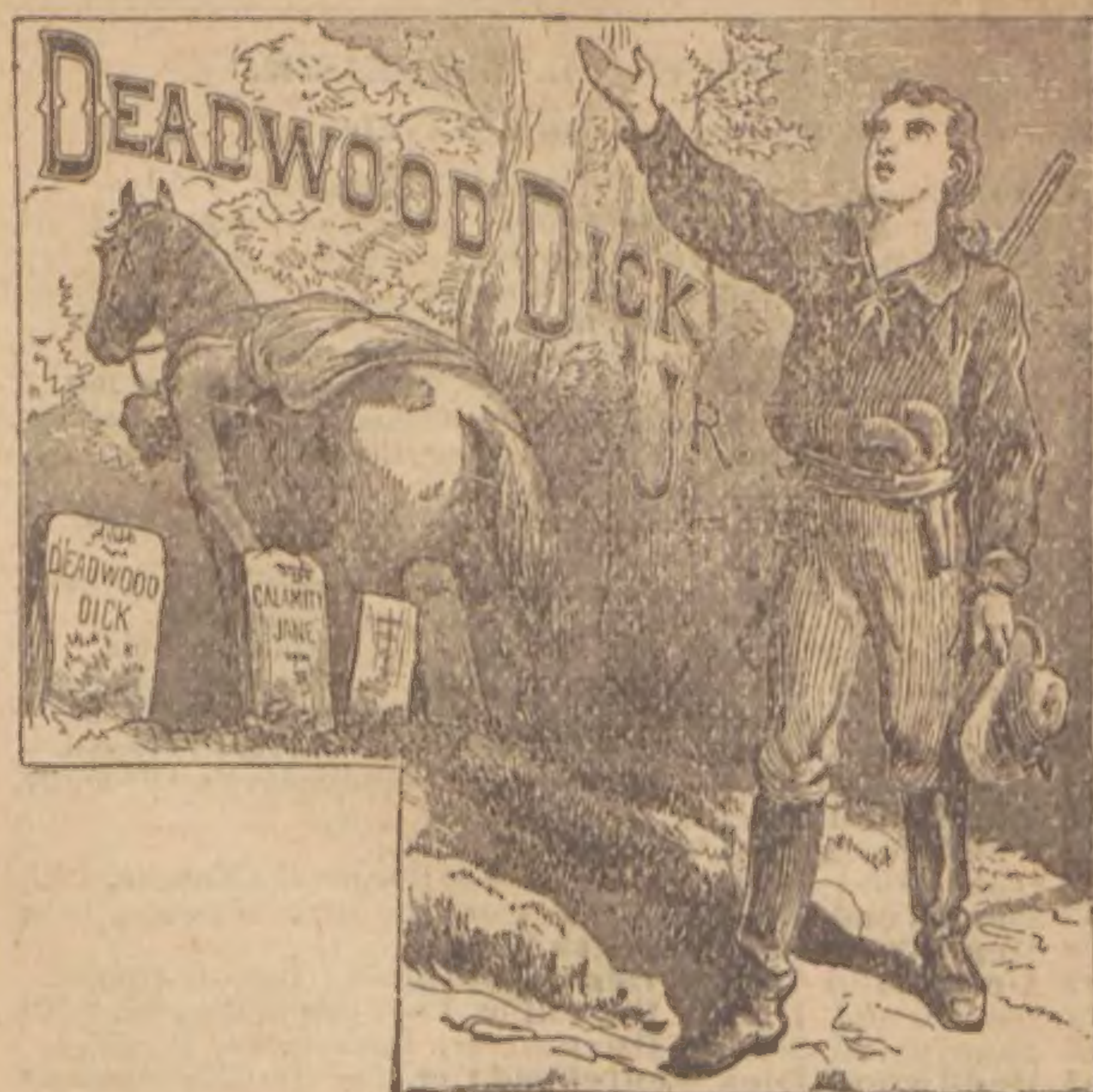
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